The Way Forward

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Rating:	Mature
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Categories:	F/F, F/M, M/M, Gen
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Bella Crawford/Jack Crawford, Will Graham & Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Abigail Hobbs, Abigail Hobbs & Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Abigail Hobbs & Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom/Margot Verger, Alana Bloom/Hannibal Lecter, Bedelia Du Maurier & Hannibal Lecter, Bedelia Du Maurier & Will Graham
Characters:	Bella Crawford, Jack Crawford, Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Police Officers (Characters), Randall Tier, Dr. Frederick Chilton, Original Characters, Abigail Hobbs, Garrett Jacob Hobbs, Louise Hobbs, Will Graham's Dogs, Alana Bloom, Margot Verger, Mason Verger, Bedelia Du Maurier, Verger Baby (Hannibal), Original Child Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Character Death, Sick Character, Hannibal Lecter Being Hannibal Lecter, Blood and Violence, Car Accidents, Will Graham Knows, Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Hurt No Comfort, Graphic Description of Corpses, Implied/Referenced Character Death, Canon-Typical Violence, Hannibal Lecter Loves Will Graham, Will Graham is So Done, Will Graham is Bad at Feelings, Sick Will Graham, Harm to Animals, References to Depression, Starvation, Apathetic Abigail, POV Abigail Hobbs, Literary References & Allusions, Eating Disorders, Will Graham Loves Hannibal Lecter, Comfort No Hurt, Caring Hannibal Lecter, Protective Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham Helps Himself, Sakura (Cherry Blossoms), Not Actually Unrequited Love, Falling In Love, Jack Crawford Being Jack Crawford, Past Alana Bloom/Hannibal Lecter, POV Alana Bloom, Alana Bloom Suspects Things, Established Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Empathy, Dubious Ethics, Moral Dilemmas, Moral Ambiguity, Morally Ambiguous Will Graham, Future Character Death, Flower Language as a Threat, POV Bedelia Du Maurier, Threats of Violence, Il Mostro, Eventual Happy Ending
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The Way Forward

by Marwana

Summary

Jack is in a state, Will's house is uninhabitable so he is forced to live with Hannibal, and people are side-eying Hannibal or his actions with some healthy suspicion. Will is just done with it all.
Hannibal in the meantime has the time of his life. His darling Will is cohabitating with him (regrettably not on a permanent basis yet) and the tea-cup is finally coming back together. If only all the pieces would collaborate with him.

A story of falling in love across three continents, and those who are left behind.

Finished, and chapters will be published every weekend.

Outtakes
"But the darling was still getting used to the fact that he would devote the rest of his existence making sure he was aware just how he cherished every part of him. He would honour him in every way he could.(...) Will, while he really should dress more appropriately to show off his fit physique, was perfect just the way he was."

"He could see the future spread out in front of him, not unlike a tree growing its branches high up into the sky (...) All the different possibilities he had became visible in his mind’s eye in the same way he normally painted the picture of a murder that had taken place in the past."

Notes

I know it took me longer to publish this than I mentioned, but real life caught up with me. House-hunting is going slow (and is a terrible, horrible thing and I would be happy if I never have to do it again... Sadly, I say that every single time), I had less time than I thought I would have to write this story, and I got completely stuck while writing... To be honest, two chapters are still not finished to the level that I am happy with them, but I should have time enough the upcoming weeks to finish them in time to keep to the schedule of a weekly update.

Also, I really could not think of a title, so if anyone has a better suggestion: let me know!

This last part consist of 8 chapters:
1 - Left Behind - Bella Crawford
2 - America
3 - Sense and Sensibility

4 - Japan
5 - Following Breadcrumbs
6 - America
7 - Coming Home
8 - Italy

See the end of the work for more notes

Left Behind - Bella Crawford

"*Good evening Bella, I am sorry to disturb you at such a late hour and I am aware you do not want to hear from me in particular, but is Jack with you?"* The doctor's voice sounded off. It took her long seconds before she realised that it was concern she heard in his tone. She had no doubt that his face would be creased in a slight frown. She had seen it before, when he had come visit her in the hospital after he had *saved* her.

"No, he has yet to come home," she answered slowly, tiredly. Everything took so much energy nowadays. Even the act of having to pick up the landline could wipe out the last of her energy on her bad days. This had not been a good day as it was, "I thought he was to join you for dinner?"

"*He did. He left my house nearly two hours ago,"* she was told, *"he had misplaced his hat while here, and he had kindly asked me to call him so he could pick it up if he was still in the area. Will found it not fifteen minutes after Jack had left. Strangely enough, I have yet to be able to reach him. All our attempts so far have gone to his voicemail after ringing for a couple of times. Considering the weather, I assumed he just did not dare pick up the phone, but he should have arrived by now if we take the weather and travel time in account. I had hoped to hear that he had arrived home safely."*

"What are you saying?" she managed to get out numbly. She heard someone say something softly on his side of the line. The thunder and slashing rain outside her own windows made it hard for her to concentrate. A storm had washed in sometime after she had managed to finish her dinner, which must have been hours ago. It had been mentioned in the weather forecast of course, but the sheer violence of the storm had been a surprise considering how lovely the weather had been up until that moment.

Jack was a lot of things and he took more risks than she was comfortable with, but he was *not* a careless driver. He would have tried to sit the weather out, or drive as careful as he could if it really looked like it would not let up. She did not know what to think. She only knew that Jack should have arrived home, but had not. She only knew something was very, very wrong.

"*I apologise for the concern I might have caused by calling you,"* the Lithuanian psychiatrist said, his tinny voice sounded contrite, "*we know the general route he must have taken. Will is going to take my car to follow that same route. Jack might just have some issues with his own vehicle and his phone."*
"I- thank you," she managed to get out.

She might not be happy with the psychiatrist for his actions when she had tried to end her suffering, and she might blame him for any pain and indignity she had had to deal with since, but she knew that he was a good friend to her husband. The man was always calm and collected, and while he could be incredibly aloof, he had always been willing to help whenever he was needed. She was somewhat aware that Jack had been suspicious of Hannibal due to the accusations Will Graham had made at his address, but she was also aware that there was no evidence whatsoever. She did not know who to trust in this particular

situation, so she had gone with the age-old believe that everyone was innocent until the opposite had been proven.

"I hate to have to bring this up, but I need you to decide one matter for me," Lecter's apologetic tone of voice brought her back to reality, "*as we do not know what might have happened, as we cannot reach him no matter how many times we have tried, and as we all know that he might have enemies. Do you want me to call the police and report him missing? Just to be sure?"*
She closed her eyes as her mind conjured the worst scenarios it could, "you believe…?"
"I do not know what to believe. I put my hopes on the fact that his car has malfunctioned and his phone has an empty battery," the doctor told her firmly, "*but I rather prepare for the worst and hope for the best. I prefer to be accused of paranoia when he comes home safely, than to be considered uncaring when my actions could have saved his life."*

Something hardened within her at his words. She might not know the details, but she knew what type of individuals her husband had to deal with on a daily basis, "call the police, please. Report him missing."
"Of course," Lecter said graciously, *"please ask Jack to call me as soon as he arrives at home. I will let you know if or when Will finds him."*
"Thank you," she replied automatically. She did not hear his platitudes or his goodbyes. She did not realise that she was still clutching the phone tightly within her hand, minutes after he had hung up.

All she knew was that her husband was somewhere out there, and that he was not home with her.

oOo

She had not slept a wink that night. The police had reached out to her not long after she had gotten off the phone with Lecter to verify that she wanted to report her husband missing. She had told them in fits and starts of her condition and the devotion Jack had shown since. They had been very understanding and promised to look for him. The fact that he was one of them, even though the local police normally *loathed* the FBI, made them resolute in their dedication to find him.

A female police officer was sent to keep her company not long after, mainly to pick up the phone for her and to help her with whatever it was she needed. She was informed somewhat star-struck that doctor Lecter had offered to come and assist her, but he had been firmly instructed to stay at his own place in case Jack would make his way there. She had been glad when she had been notified of that. She did not feel like dealing with the self-assured psychiatrist, no matter how competent and distant the man could be.

Entire teams had been sent out to look for her husband, regardless of the weather. They checked in with her every hour, just to keep her in the loop. She was grateful to know how far they were willing to go, but she also wished they had not bothered. She rather preferred believing that he was sheltering somewhere safe, than knowing where he was *not*. She knew that she was only deceiving herself, but it was all she had left.

The heavy rains had made the search attempt during the night near impossible, however, and they had only been able to tell her that Jack was not near any of the roads every time they reached out to her.

Will had been the first to call her to tell her that he had not been able to find Jack's car. He earnestly told her that he had driven slowly along both sides of the road, but that he had not found anything on the track, or in the parking places or ditches alongside it. He promised her that he would search along the route from Baltimore to Quantico next, and that he would call again as soon as he had found something. She knew of the clashes and conflicts the younger agent had had with her forceful husband. She also knew that Will Graham had too much respect for life as a whole and the older man in particular to ever hurt him.

A police officer had been next, only to ask if she still had not heard anything from her husband. He also asked her kindly but firmly if Jack was someone who might turn of his phone, or neglect to charge it. She had equally firmly told them that Jack Crawford never, ever turned off his phone. It had been a point of contention within their marriage, after all.

The rain finally stopped when dawn approached, and the sun hesitantly broke through the heavy cloud cover to shine down upon the drenched and wind-whipped land. It made searching easier, but the rain had washed away any trails that might have shown any clues to her husband's whereabouts.

It took them until eleven in the morning before they finally found Jack's station wagon, folded neatly around a large, sturdy tree slightly away from the road he would have taken home.

oOo

She had been forced to come and identify him, just to make sure it truly was Jack Crawford. Will had haltingly offered to do so in her stead, but she had thanked him for his offer and had firmly declined. Jack had had to helplessly watch her steady decline due to her illness. In return, she could be strong enough to observe his forced destruction due to tragic circumstances.

And the heavily mutilated body on the autopsy table had been his. There had been no doubt about that. She was just glad that they had only shown her his mostly intact face.

They did investigate, as he truly had some horrifying wounds, but even his own team had to grudgingly admit that, for all intents and purposes, it seemed to be a tragic incident. There was no evidence of foul play. No DNA was found except Jack's, her own, Lecter's and Will's, all of which were expected to be found and all of which were in places they should be. There was nothing underneath his nails, and the car had been as clean as Jack always kept it.

They had been hesitant to tell her the full extant of his wounds, but after long hours she had finally convinced them to share the report with her. She had worked for and with the army before she had become too bedridden. She could handle it.

It truly had been excessive, and she had been glad to read that he had not suffered long after his neck had been broken, probably by the sheer force of the collision with the tree. Glass

from the windows breaking had caused small cuts on his face, and larger cuts on the palms of his hands where they had dug into it due to his weight combined with gravity. His nose was broken, most likely due to the force of the airbag. His left leg was broken, both wrists were sprained. Several ribs had been cracked, probably when his seatbelt had forced him in place, and at least one had pierced his left lung. A piece of metal from the hood of the car had gone straight through the window and into his right shoulder.

Hannibal assured them that Jack had been careful, and had only had one small glass of wine with the main course. The blood tests affirmed his words, and showed that he had not been drugged in any way, shape or form.

Jack's phone had shown multiple calls and some voicemails, mainly from Hannibal and from Will but also some from her and various police officers. The first call had been nearly fifteen minutes after he had left the stately mansion in Baltimore. The last voicemail had been left behind when Will had driven the route Jack normally followed from the FBI office in Quantico towards Hannibal's home in Baltimore. Not a single one had been answered and the tone of voice with every voicemail became more and more concerned the longer he remained missing.

The car had been located at about a thirty minute drive from Baltimore, and several metres away from the main road. It had barely been visible from the road, and no one was surprised that both Will and the police had missed it on account of lack of visibility due to the sleets of rain that had come down during the night.

Jack's mobile phone had been turned on, the battery had had a charge of 74 percent when it had been found. The carrosserie was badly damaged, and water had leaked in. The hood of the vehicle was completely wrinkled. The collision combined with pieces of metal from the hood and branches of the sturdy tree had shattered the front and side windows. The front doors had been forced open by the impact.

The board computer of the car had shown them that he had driven slightly below the allowed maximum speed and he had had both hands on the wheel the entire time. The music had been turned off, and his wipers had been on full-strength.

Jack had not even tried to pick up the mobile when it had rung. Not even with the handsfree set in the car. He had let it ring until it went to voicemail. The only seatbelt engaged had been his own, his jacket and his briefcase had been found in the trunk of his car. He had been alone.

The road he had taken had little to no lighting along it.

It appeared as if he had lost control while driving on the slippery, rain-slicked road. It might have been caused by aquaplaning, or he might have been forced to swerve to the side when an animal had appeared in front of him. She would never know.

All she knew was that her husband had died in a traffic incident when he had tried to come home to her and the all-consuming grief that would remain with her until the day she died.

oOo

The funeral was well attended, and everyone present had something positive to say about Jack. However, she had never been blind to his faults and she welcomed the fact that some of the speakers were willing to acknowledge the worst of his character to highlight the best.

“Jack was not the easiest person to deal with, but he was a good man with a strong sense of justice,” Will told the crowd. He appeared slightly nervous and his eyes shot everywhere without ever landing on another person or the casket, “he was utterly devoted to two things in his life: his work, and his beloved Bella.”

She felt a wave of bitterness come over her. It was not Will’s intention, but he easily hit an incredible sore spot within her with his words. She had been important to Jack, but work had always come first. She had been similar, but it hurt to realise that her death would have freed him to fully devote himself to the one love he had left: his work. She knew that he would have missed her, it would have crippled him even, and that he would never remarry, but the knowledge that she would always have come second was a heavy burden to bear.

“We might not have seen eye to eye on a lot of topics, and Jack was often far too pushy and disrespectful for my taste and for my health, but he was a strong leader who led from the front lines,” he continued both self-deprecating and bluntly, “he was respected, and he will be missed.”

She appreciated his honesty. She also respected the strength he showed by acknowledging the harsh relationship he had had with her husband, and the fact that he had still helped him out.

She hoped he would never change. For the sake of Jack’s memory, and for his own.

oOoOoOo

It had been not been difficult to stage an accident. The weather had worked in his favour, all traces of foul play had been wiped away.

The collision itself had been the toughest part to live through, the damage the impact had caused him and the small wounds and sprains he had gained even though he had relaxed his muscles as much as he had could had been the hardest parts to hide from the investigating officers. Luckily, the dogs had been an easy excuse to give, and the phone calls he had made and the voicemails he had left on Crawford’s phone had given him an almost unbreakable alibi.

The wounds he had given the other man had been hidden away by correct staging of the body, any foreign DNA they might have found could easily be explained away by the fact that Jack had had dinner at his place.

The blood staining his own patio had been washed away by the heavy torrents. Most of the damage and disarray in his house had been simple to straighten, the broken window could be explained away by the storm that had *caused* Jack’s incident. All he had to do was point towards the thick tree branch that had broken away from one of the trees in his backyard when he was asked about the damages.

Only Will could disavow him now.

The United States of America – Baltimore area

Chapter Notes

I will not have access to either my laptop or a stable internet connection this weekend as I will be traveling for a bit, so hereby the second chapter three days early.

I updated the tags for this story, so be mindful of them!

To be posted on the weekend of the 9th: Sense and Sensibility

oOoOo

It took him quite some time to forgive Hannibal for what happened that day.

Though he only remembered flashes of those first few minutes – hours? – after he had watched the murder of Jack happening right in front of him, they would be burned into the depths of his mind for the rest of his life.

Once the shock of the unsuspected kiss had worn off he had, somehow, in some way, managed to wrench himself out of the very secure grasp he had found himself in. He remembered stumbling away from the other man as if it had happened in slow motion and, though he did not know how, he had found himself sitting in the chair he had left not too long before the events. Hannibal had been kneeling in front of him, dirtying his only slightly blood spattered but fixable trousers beyond repair but clearly not caring as he worried about him even though he himself was in quite the state.

He could not hear anything beyond the sound of the rushing of his blood, and he felt his view tunnelling as his breathing became too fast and too shallow. It had all been too much, too soon.

He could see the future spread out in front of him, not unlike a tree growing its branches high up into the sky until he could not see the very end of them. Some were broken off early, others kept on going and going into infinity. All the different possibilities he had became visible in his mind's eye in the same way he normally painted the picture of a murder that had taken place in the past. But now all the different ways *his* life could go on stretched out in front of him. All the *options* he had, all the actions he could take and how they would directly and indirectly influence the rest of his natural life. Or how they could bring about his end. All of it was laid out in front of him. It was incredibly overwhelming.

In some of them, he watched himself get up, push past Hannibal and call the police. In most of them, Hannibal let him and surrendered peacefully. The trial would end up dragging on and on and on until the doctor was either locked away in the State Hospital for the Criminal

insane or a normal prison. Sometimes awaiting a lifelong imprisonment, sometimes his execution.

In most of the cases he was a key witness, in some he was right there next to him on the stand and found guilty as the Bonnie to his Clyde. Regardless, he noticed that he himself became more and more haggard as time went on. Oh, he saw himself find a nice person to settle down with in maybe one or two futures if he was not locked away, but the guilt – over Jack and over Hannibal – remained. He even saw himself help Hannibal escape in over half of *these* unfolded futures. Not all of those futures ended up with him alive at the end of the day, but more often than not he went out in a spectacular blaze.

In other branches of the future possibilities, Hannibal stopped him as he tried to call the police. In those, he saw Hannibal utterly *break* as he wrenched himself away from him. He saw himself forcefully subdued until he lost consciousness, and though he would wake up again in most of these branches of the future, it was not in always a place he recognised. Sometimes that place was not even in the same continent as he had lost his consciousness in the first place.

But in the majority of the future possibilities, he did not call the police or the FBI at all. In some, he got up and walked away. Sometimes he ended his own life. Sometimes he tried to run away from everything, like he had promised himself he would do after he had gotten out of Chilton's sphere of influence. Hannibal always came after him and he did not get far.

And in some he stayed right where he was. There were a lot of options when it came to that future possibility. In some, he saw himself help Hannibal hide the body. Or he saw them run away together as they left Jack where he had fallen. In others, Hannibal sedated him, carried him inside to let him sleep, and he would wake up to an unchanged world that lacked Jack.

Sometimes the knowledge that Hannibal had killed Jack would fester, most of the time it did not.

All of these futures and many more flashed in front of his eyes as what felt like millennia, but could only have been minutes, went by.

It all depended on one, single action from his side and he easily fell into the familiar rhythm of the golden pendulum he used to guide him as it swung in front of him. He patiently followed along as Hannibal got up from his kneeling position and walked backwards to where Jack had been dropped. Blood rapidly seeped back into his body before it rose and his brown eyes – so desperate, so helpless – opened again, alive once more as Hannibal's hands seemed to put his neck in the correct position. He watched on as he saw the fight happen once again, only in reverse, and he trailed after them as they moved the battle to death inside the large house. He watched every stab of that sharp, sharp knife land, every fist that hit or missed its intended target, every drop of blood that landed on the floor, and every bone that was broken, until he came upon the very start of the fight.

One harshly spoken sentence too much cost agent Jack Crawford, head of the BSU, his life.

Time seemed to start again as soon as he arrived at that point, and he watched on as the fight took place. The sheer malice that erupted from Hannibal, and the shock on Jack's face as he

realised both the truth in what he had been telling him all those months ago and the folly of the small pinpricks he had dealt the creatures underneath Hannibal's carefully created person suit that entire evening. The heavily one-sided fight as the metaphorical captain Ahab fought against his white whale, and lost. The aftermath, followed by the many branches of the future as they were once again laid out in front of him. He observed it all as his mental vision went back and forth between present, past and potential future.

In the end, he only really saw one set of branches going forward that would keep his own agency within the world mostly intact.

"You are an asshole," he said with a heavy scowl on his face as his gaze sharpened and he looked up into eyes darkened with concern, "help me up so we can fix this. I rather not be send back into Chilton's clutches because of you. Again."

oOo

Acting as the concerned former colleague was surprisingly easy, he selfishly and gladly found. For one, he really had no idea where the absolute infuriating man he shared a house with had *ditched* the remains of what once been his boss. For another, while he would always mourn Jack Crawford, it meant that he would not have to deal with the grief of once again having to defend himself against the full force of the FBI.

Because Jack would have nurtured that suspicion he had spoken about during the dinner until he would finally decide that he was as guilty of all of the deaths caused by the Chesapeake Ripper as the actual Ripper himself. It might take months, it might even take years, but he would have hit that mental point some time in the future. Had he *lived*.

Now he would only have to deal with the FBI agents *if* Hannibal screwed up or if they came to him for his special way of thinking. Guiltily, he was glad for the reprieve it meant for him.

That did not however mean that said cannibalistic serial killer was of the hook. In fact, it took days of his equivalent of puppy-dog eyes and having his favourite meals served to him by fidgeting hands before he even deigned to stay in the same room as him for longer than it took to stand from wherever he had been sitting and walking away. It took even longer before he was willing to talk to him again.

He *loathed* being manipulated, after all.

oOoOo

"Let us make a trade," Hannibal murmured softly into his ear as he leaned over him as he topped up his Japanese green tea. They had been enjoying a particularly lovely lunch of sashimi made out of fresh swordfish, eel, oyster and allis shad served with daikon, nori and some green leaves he had not recognised. All of it had been served with multiple sauces and side dishes such as pickled ginger, and freshly cooked rice.

He was quite aware that he was buttering him up for *something*, he just did not know *what.*

Hannibal had taken to join him for lunch on his free Wednesdays not too long after he had forgiven him for forcing him into making the choice he had. Most of the time he used that free day to take his dogs home so they could use the free land to roam around, some days he stayed at Hannibal's. Regardless, the psychiatrist would always join him wherever he was to share a freshly made brunch, lunch, picknick or other noon-related meal with him.

"A trade?" he asked, somewhat hesitantly as he lowered his chopsticks and placed them down onto the neat pieces of stone specifically meant for that purpose. He had the feeling he would need his full attention on the other man for *this* particular conversation, "what do you want to trade now?"

The last time they had *traded* something, it had been the doctor's freedom for Jack's murder and his own sense of guilt. He might not have killed the other man, but he had neither stopped Hannibal, nor had he called the police on him. He had even *helped* search for Jack's remains, though he had known exactly what had happened and approximately where the older agent had been at that specific moment in time. He might not have driven the car that had contained the body, but Hannibal had, up to a point, kept him *informed* throughout the entire process. Actually, now that he though of it, what had he actually gained from *that* particular trade?

"A trade," Hannibal repetition of the words as he carefully placed the unadorned, ceramic teapot down and seated himself next to him brought him back to the here and now, "you sell your house and truly move in with me, and I gift you the Montana cabin."
"How is that a trade?" he scoffed somewhat incredulous as he leaned back and looked at the doctor, "and why would I want to move permanently in with you? What do you get out of it?"

"Why would you not want to move in with me?" the older man remarked calmly as if the entire topic had *not* come out of nowhere. He placed his fancy napkin down on his lap fastidiously before he continued, "you have shared my house with me for a period of more than *three* months. You have your own bedroom and study here, your dogs have everything they need now that their enclosure is finished, my house is closer to both of your work locations, and you can have influence over me and my hobbies as much as you prefer to guide them."

"What do you get out of it?" he asked again, somewhat suspicious, "and maybe because you don't actually have a lot of land that my dogs and I can use to roam around. Nor a brook to fish in."
"You," the psychiatrist said with a soft, fond smile and an ardent glint in his amber eyes as he easily ignored his grumpy remark about the lack of land, "that is all I really want: your presence in my life. To know where you are, what you are doing, what you are thinking. To spoil you, to court you, to *love* you. And the cabin has all you mentioned, and I really do not mind driving up there every weekend."

He felt himself flush and he ducked his head in embarrassment. He had only kissed him once, on that particular evening, and he had not tried to do so since. That did not however mean that he had not tried to seduce him. The doctor was just always *there*, and it was clear to him that he was completely *gone* on him.

Hannibal had always been tactile with him, from the very day they had met right up until he had been sent to the Baltimore State Hospital of the Criminal Insane. A hand on his arm of shoulder, a soft touch on his lower back to guide him, a finger under his chin or two hands on his cheeks to check his pupils, all of it had become normal to him when he had considered them to be friends.

That, of course, had all changed when he had first been locked away for crimes not his own, and later been found innocent and had been released. He had not wanted to be close to the other man after everything he had done to him, either directly or indirectly. He had no wish to see him, to speak to him, to think of him, but Hannibal had not given him a choice. While he had started out with phone calls and letters at first, he had escalated with visits to his house and at his work until he had actually found himself begrudgingly allowing the other man back into his life.

But the hurt, the betrayal, the distrust, they had never really left him. Even now, though the once-foreigner had made it very clear how *devoted* he was to him, he found himself hesitating to lean upon the Lithuanian doctor. He had been forced and manipulated to live in his Baltimore manor due to the damages to his own home, courtesy of the psychiatrist smiling as if *he* was the most important and beloved thing in the world. He had allowed the man to walk free even though he had the needed evidence to lock him away until the end of his natural life, but he would never forget what he was capable of. The manipulation, the unconcealed violence, it made it al so hard to build something akin to trust when one knew the pain of treachery intimately.

So Hannibal gave him space and did not force himself or his attention upon him when he made it clear that he wanted to be left alone. But the moments he was in his presence, he was always close by. The purring in his ear such as when he had offered the trade just now had become the norm, not an exception. Soft touches whenever they were in a room together had become something he had gotten used to. Small, thoughtful gifts such as wildflowers, books he found interesting, or a new recipe for doggy snacks were appreciated whenever they were handed to him. Their talks was something he was always looking forward to, as was the peace and quiet of his presence whenever he needed it. It was both flattering and discomforting to have that much devotion focused on him, and him alone, by a man as intense as doctor Hannibal Lecter.

It made it all so very hard to know how to feel about the same man who had both helped him and hurt him beyond recognition.

oOoOo

His help had been asked on a very bloody, very nasty case by the new head of the behavioural science unit. An unknown amount of young individuals had been mauled and ripped apart by what appeared to be either a large and aggressive animal commanded by a particular sadistic individual, or a very faulty wood shredder. Considering the evidence, or lack thereof, they had already concluded that it was more likely the second case right until they had found the almost dagger-like tooth of an extinct animal sticking firmly to what had once been a femur.

It had actually started with the mauled remains of a driver dragged from his crashed vehicle. Considering the amount of blood, it seemed like he had hit a deer or a similarly large animal

with enough force to damage the front of his lorry significantly and to turn whatever he had hit into an unrecognisable smear of blood, gore, and pieces of bone and hide on the front of and within the grill.

The road had been an empty and rarely used one, and by the time the lorry had been found little had remained of both the driver and the carcass of the creature he had hit as the scavengers had gotten there first. At the time, it had been believed that he had had the bad luck to run into a very hungry predator and that he had been wounded enough that he had not been able to fight it off.

It was only after they had found the second set of what had once been individuals and the strange damage to the top of the lorry, that they started to consider the driver to be the first, unlucky victim of a killer turned serial.

As they were at a loss, and as the killer had gone serial very quickly, they believed they had no other choice than to drag him into the cold, wintery scene of an open area filled with the first real snow of the year and the bloody and grisly remains of what had once been young people enjoying a wintery trip with friends.

“What can you tell me about the perp?” the nasally and reedy voice of the agent who had introduced himself as ‘agent Jeremy Prentiss, ad interim head of the BSU’ sounded from behind him. The man had already apologised for calling him out into the cold on his day off, and for the head cold he was apparently and noticeably sporting.

“He is not going to cease unless someone stops him,” he murmured softly in reply as he squatted down to study what appeared to be a footprint in a rare, sheltered spot. He carefully made sure that the caramel coloured, probably expensive jacket Hannibal had pushed onto him did not hit either the snow-covered ground or the blood darkening the snow, “whoever did this is human, but he believes himself to be an animal.”
“He suffers from a identity disorder?” the agent asked somewhat sceptical, but a couple of loud sneezes interrupted him from saying anything else.

“Oh, he does not believe himself to suffer from it,” he said wryly as he rose from his crouch so he could look at the sniffling agent. He put his hands in the pockets of the delightfully warm coat before he continued, “he has fully embraced that side of him, much to the detriment of his unfortunate victims. Luckily for us, it probably took some time before he reached this point which means that he has visited one or multiple psychologists or psychiatrists in the past. You might want to ask all medical personnel who deal with mental health in the surrounding areas if they ever had a patient some five to ten years ago, as it is likely he is currently somewhere in his late twenties or early thirties, who was brought in by his parents for aggressive behaviour such as excessive biting or scratching, grunting and growling instead of talking when irritated, and other animal-like behaviour. That will be the best starting point you have to find your guy.”

oOo

As he had expected some individuals with a background in mental health stepped forward as soon as the FBI requested any insight in a former patient with a very specific identity disorder. Most of them had dealt with people who turned out to have or have had a sexual

fetish with regards to animals, but three actually had something of value to offer.
He was not surprised at all when he saw that a certain Lithuanian, hedonistic collector of the rarified was one of them.

“He was completely out of hand. He was the new kid in school, quiet, withdrawn and slightly smaller than most in his years. He had been expelled from his last school, though we had not been told why, and he started halfway through the year. His parents were the doting, working-class type,” the first, a former school nurse turned mental coach, said with a heavy sigh. Her stylish glasses could not hide the nervously shifting eyes as they shot from him to the actual FBI agent next to him and back, “he was slight and wiry, but he fought dirty. At first we just thought that he was being held down by bullies and that he bit them because that was the only thing he could *do*. The other boys tried to tell us that they were not actually bullying him, and that he was the one that instigated most of the fights that ended with at least two or three people bleeding, but we did not believe them. He was just as often in the infirmary as the boys that bullied him, after all, and more often than not he had the standard pattern of wounds that pointed towards kids being rough with a smaller peer. They were caught in the act twice, and all of them were punished for fighting.”

She slumped down slightly and her eyes sank down to watch her hands where they encircled the paper cup containing the now tepid tea. They did not say anything but waited patiently for her to continue.

“It was after the fifth time it happened that one of the teachers actually saw what happened from the very start,” she said briskly after long minutes of silence, as if she really wanted to be done with it so she could forget that part of her past, “the boys we had believed to be bullies had just been hanging out and about near the bushes that acted as a fence, smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol or watching porn, when Randall suddenly jumped from the bushes at them and bit the boy closest to him in his bare upper arm. The boys immediately reacted and removed him violently from their friend, and a similar fight as we had walked into before broke out. The teacher that had seen it happen called us in, and we stopped the fight as we had before. Randall Tier was expelled from school and we firmly advised his parents to send him to a psychiatrist.”

“And that is were I came in,” the psychologist said tiredly after she had largely summarised the same story as the nurse had told them. She had left the name of the young man, their probable perpetrator, out of her narrative, “his mother came in with him the first couple of sessions, and at the time I believed I was dealing with a sullen, lonely boy that had trouble with emotionally connecting to his peers or making friends. To put it overly simplified: based on what I was told, what I saw, and what I had to conclude from the few answers I managed to get from the young man, I was leaning towards a diagnoses of autism of some kind though I had yet to determine where he exactly fell on the spectrum. I informed his parents of my preliminary hypothesis, and requested that the next session was with him alone. That was the last session I had with him, as he attacked me as soon as the questions started to *irritate* him. I saw no other option than to have him institutionalised. For his own safety, and the safety of his parents. I handed him over to the psychiatrist who ran the institute, and who had more experience with these cases than I ever hope to gain.”

“Please be aware that I cannot tell you his name or when I treated the patient, as I am still bound by my doctor-patient confidentiality, but I can tell you that I have had a patient in the past that shows some overlap with the required characteristics asked about,” Hannibal said smoothly. His posture was as relaxed as it always was even though he was forced to sit in a chair that was known to be unforgiven on the back and the lights above him were harsh on the eyes. The rooms in which witnesses were asked to tell their story were only slightly better than the interrogation rooms, after all, and they smelled just as badly of stale sweat and bad coffee. The agent that was handling the case in the absence of the now truly sick Jeremy Prentiss nodded and politely but firmly asked him to continue.

“A former colleague of mine who worked at the institute you mentioned, he died of acute pancreatic cancer not two years ago, contacted me to ask both for a second opinion and my help with a special case,” the psychiatrist continued, though his dark eyes never left his own and a soft smile was on his lips. He seemed to find the entire situation amusing, and he seemed to be *happy* to be in his presence during a time he normally had to go without him due to a pesky thing like work, “a young man who seemed convinced that he was a large predator imprisoned in the body of a weak creature incapable of executing the instinctual, mental impulses his brain sent to his body. With some time and effort, my colleague and I managed to diagnose him and we managed to help him *fit* into his own skin.”

“You fixed him?” the agent asked, a sceptical brow raised as he studied the file they had created so far.
“We assisted him in learning how to handle his unique case so he could become a functional member of our society,” the Lithuanian doctor stated, but something he recognised as satisfaction could be heard in his tone of voice. Considering the man he was talking to, that might be because he did manage to *fix* the patient. Or it might be because he managed to wind him up and watch him go, go, go.

oOo

Both Hannibal and the psychologist they had talked to had refrained from telling them the name of the young man that was their most likely suspect, but the former nurse had not been bound by a law such as the HIPAA and she had let his name slip. Twice.

It had not been difficult to find Randall Tier, now an employee of one of the National History museums the area boasted, though he had not been in any shape to visit the man himself. He had come down with the same cold that had temporarily felled the ad interim head of the behavioural science unit, much to the tutting delight of Hannibal who could now freely dote on him as much as he wanted.

In his frustration with the smothering attention of the serial killer he shared a house with, he had requested Hannibal to go in his stead.

He had not considered the results of that particular decision.

“Really Hannibal,” he said vexed as he wobbled forward on weak, shaky legs until he was nearly leaning against the table. His bout of cold had left him easily drained of his energy and walking down the stairs and out onto the patio that had seen another murder not too long ago had exhausted him. He glared down at the little he could see of the ancient, gleaming, now

cracked bones and liquid blood that stood out in the dark, “did you *have* to kill him in the garden?”
“He gave me little choice,” came the unperturbed answer as the doctor carefully clenched and unclenched his right hand to check his knuckles for any damage beyond the superficial, “he was about to attack the dogs, and I rather he refrained from harming them. I had to put him down like the animal he believed himself to be.”

“You beat him to death,” he deadpanned flatly as he sank down onto the table as his legs gave out, “with your *fists*.”
Hannibal coughed slightly embarrassed, “the racket he was making had already roused the dogs, and I was not willing to risk them waking you up. You need all the rest you can get.”
“And you couldn’t have stabbed him? Or broke his neck?” he asked him in disbelief.

“I will have you know that I have mastered several forms of martial arts, including boxing,” he was told with haughty disdain.
“You just couldn’t reach his neck, could you,” he said shrewdly as he studied him intently.
“There is that,” Hannibal agreed with a slight incline of his head.

“I am going back to bed,” he finally muttered mulishly after long seconds in which they just stared at each other, “you can deal with Tier. And the neighbours. God, it is a miracle they did not hear anything.”
He carefully pushed himself away from the table and started to hobble inside on faltering legs.

“The snow muffles quite some sound,” Hannibal said as he hurried forwards to help him inside, “and the weather and the darkness means that people stay inside with doors and windows closed.”
“Yeah, yeah,” he grunted as he waved him away, “just, deal with it.”

oOo

He would later wonder about his own callousness when dealing with the fact that Hannibal had beaten someone to death with his fists, but to be fair on himself he *did* have some other things to deal with directly after the inadvertent murder of Randall Tier. Like accidentally providing Hannibal with an alibi.

When Tier disappeared, and later reappeared as nothing more than a skin wrapped around the skeleton of a sabre tooth cat, the FBI did drop by at Hannibal’s. Jack’s ghost shone through in the elaborate notes he had left on his suspicion.

However, it quickly became evident that Hannibal had a seemingly solid alibi and just could not have murdered *and* butchered the young man as Will had come down with pneumonia that same evening. Not long after he had actually committed the murder, though the FBI would never actually determine the correct time of death, and after he had managed to store the body wherever he stored his victims, he had had to bring him to the ER to deal with an extremely high fever and to get him assistance with breathing. They were especially worried about him as his bout of encephalitis was not that long ago.

Even the doctor's bloodied and bruised knuckles were easily excused away as having them scraped open against he wall when he had had to catch him when he fell as his legs gave out underneath him.

He was out of commission for two weeks, and spent four more weeks just resting to become healthy enough to start coming into work again. Hannibal was by his side that entire period of time. He brought him to and from the hospital, took care of the dogs, cooked and cleaned everything and somehow managed to deface the skeletal remains of an extinct predatory mammal with the hide of a suspected serial killer and disappear the rest of the body without breaking a sweat *and* without causing anyone to suspect either of them of the murder and mutilation. As one does.

It was during the first couple of days of those four weeks that he had little to no energy to do anything but eat, sleep, rest and think. It meant mainly that he could do nothing but consider his own attitude towards the *murder* of Tier.

Was he mournful of the young man's death? Not particularly, as he had already concluded that the killer would not stop unless someone *forced* him to. The fact that he was dead just meant that he could not be brought to justice by an appointed court, though he would probably have ended in the care of whoever ran the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminal Insane or a similar institute anyway. It was almost more merciful that he had been killed.

Did he care for the fact that Hannibal had killed him? If he was honest with himself, he could not really bring himself to care for that either. He had already known in theory what Hannibal – the notorious Chesapeake Ripper – was capable of, both physically but also psychologically. His cruelty did not come as a surprise at all. The physical aspects of the murder had not been part of the profile he had created for the Ripper, though. He was truly astonished by the fact that he had *beaten him to death*. It was such an uncouth way of killing someone that he really had not expected doctor Hannibal Lecter – count and the eighth of his name, hedonist known for his appreciation of culture and the finer things in life – to fight in such an inelegant way. He was aware that he was incredibly strong, and anger could do quite a bit for someone, but this had been out of character for the normally unflappable man.

So, beyond being perplexed, what did he actually feel about the entire situation? He was aware that he was irritated, both with himself and the circumstances around the other's death. He was angry, as Tier could have and probably would have gone after his dogs. He was slightly afraid, as his life might be uprooted again if the suspicion of being an accomplice to the kill was placed on him. He was also fearful of what his callousness towards the death said about *him* and his morality.

He had chosen to step away from all of it when he had been released so he would not be forced to follow a path that would lead to something close to corruption. But it seemed as if corruption had found him after all and he was terrified of what he might become. He tried so hard to be a good man, but it was so difficult when those he deemed *good* would not mourn the death of a murderer.

But it wasn't all negative, though that did not make it any better. He was also feeling elated at having a friend that was strong and capable enough to keep him safe. And that made him irritated with himself. He was embarrassed by the fact that he felt the need to be protected in

the first place. He could take care of himself just fine, and he had done so for nearly all his life. He was also quite vexed with the fact that he didn't feel worse for the death of a fellow human being.

His thought went into circles those couple of days, and his lack of care only fed his irritation at his own blithe attitude. The fact that he was incredibly sick again and could not do anything just made it worse. He became snappish and sulky, and felt strangely like a small child incapable of throwing a tantrum. *That* did not help either, which meant he spiralled even lower.

Hannibal was surprisingly patient with him, and his grudging adoration for his care and his doting made it only *worse*.

He was beyond *elated* when he finally had enough energy to make his way outside and he spent every moment he could, which was not as much as it used to be, walking in Hannibal's wintery garden and forcefully ignoring his previous thoughts on Tier's death by pushing himself to his very limits.

oOo

The FBI did not bother them about the somewhat gruesome state Tier's remains had been found in. In fact, most of the agents were glad to see the case solved, and could not care less about the death of the killer. They were only slightly worried about the perpetrator of the murder, as it meant that Chilton might not be the Copycat after all, but in the end they just decided that this was another copycat and be done with it.

A new profile was written for the murderer, they closed the file on Tier, and he got his fee for the consultancy he had offered.

It had changed something between Hannibal and himself. The doctor had already stopped hiding most of himself form him, but now he fully showed everything about himself. The first time he had taken unfamiliar meat out of the fridge, he had just smiled playfully and wickedly at him as he prepared it for himself. He did not offer him any, and he did not ask. It wasn't too hard to guess where, or rather who, it had come from after all.

The next couple of times went similar. He turned his cuts from Tier in something for himself, and used fish or chicken or pork or beef for him. After a while, he started to trust him enough that he was not always present when Hannibal cooked his meals, and he even stopped looking suspicious when he did not recognise the meat he was given.

He had set his boundaries, and he trusted that Hannibal would not overstep now that he had him exactly where he wanted him: living together while fully knowing what he was.

Sense and Sensibility - Abigail

Chapter Summary

Hereby the story of what happened to Abigail during everything.

Chapter Notes

I went with a Austen title, not because I particularly liked that book (it is my least favourite one of all her works) but because it fit best with the theme of the story. Enjoy!

Up next week: falling in love in Japan

She had started to become so very *lonely*, and it soured something within her. Doctor Lecter – Hannibal – had stopped visiting as often as he had before to dedicate more time in *wooing* special agent Graham. He had gone from stopping by several hours or even an entire night two times a week if he could get away with it, to only two hours every Saturday. He didn't even call her nightly anymore. It had annoyed her in the past, that need of him to check up on her, but now she missed the contact with him.

His need to bring Graham into the fold was, apparently in his opinion, much stronger than her need to have regular contact with another human being. Hannibal wanted to form a *family*, a tightly knitted unit of utter devotion to one another. He believed he was just missing the last piece. After all, she had nowhere to go.

She couldn't hide the sneer on her face even if she had wanted to. Graham had *killed* her father, he would *never* replace him. Never.

Her father had been loving, a hard-working man completely devoted to *her*. She had known he had been dealing badly with the fact that she was going to leave for college. She and her mother had both teased him mercilessly for the early appearance of his empty-nest syndrome every time he had bemoaned the fact that she was growing up so fast. He had made it very clear that she would always remain his little girl. Her mother had sometimes been jealous of that commitment to her, but her father had always made whatever her mother had done or said better by taking her hunting, or shopping, or to buy ice cream. He had been the best father a girl could wish for. Her friends had agreed.

She just hadn't seen the darker side of his personality that had reared its ugly head when she had mentioned that she wanted to go to college. Or maybe she had seen it but had chosen to ignore it as firmly as she could. She was never quite sure. She had realised that all those girls

she had been talking to had disappeared not long after. She had noticed the similarities, and her father had promised that he would protect her and she would never come to harm as long as she remained *close* to him. That particular remark should have caused suspicion to grow within her, but she had just laughed it away and she hadn't taken it serious. Until she had been *forced* to take it seriously.

Maybe she had not realised it at first, and she had not immediately connected her loving father the hunter to the fact that those girls had all been exulting upon living on their own, but she had come to the correct conclusion eventually.

She had deliberately targeted those girls that looked like her after that. At first just to see if she had been right. After that first one, the third victim, just to feel that complete devotion to her. Just to feel so very loved.

And Graham had destroyed that completely and utterly when he had shot her father more times than strictly needed. Not once did she believe that her father would have truly killed her. As Hannibal and the hospital had shown, she would have survived the cut her father had given her. Had her father lived, she was completely sure that he would have escaped prison eventually and they would have left the United States to go elsewhere. He was *that* dedicated to her.

Neither the psychiatrist nor Graham would ever give her that devotion. Hannibal Lecter was too smitten by and too committed to Graham, and she knew that he only kept her around because Graham had shown some positive emotions towards her. She sometimes doubted that he truly felt *anything* for her, but then he would do something for her or act in a certain way that made that doubt disappear. She was sure that he *did* care for her in some way, but he was so very hard to read.

The foreigner was dangerous, but she had only realised that when it was already far too late. The seeming balance of mutual destruction he always mentioned to her was nothing more than an easily spun illusion. Whatever she had on him would never see him convicted. It would not even hurt his reputation much. All she had was the fact that she had heard his voice over the phone speak words that were innocent enough, the fact that he had helped her bury that moronic *boy*, and that he had cut off her ear in an attempt to pin the blame on Graham. Nothing more. She had no evidence beyond her own word.

She had been so proud of herself when she had believed she had him firmly in her pocket. She had been so incredibly high on her own success. She had believed she had fooled him. All of it had been a mirage. He had never once been fooled by her, he had seen her from the get-go for what she was.

And he had manipulated her with very little effort on his side. Now she was considered nothing more than another victim of the Chesapeake Ripper. She was not even believed to have survived her encounter with the notorious serial killer, even though they had only found some of her blood and her *ear*.

She had been so gleefully happy to help make sure Graham was locked away. It had been the ultimate revenge she could take for stealing her beloved father away, as killing the *special*

agent would be a death sentence. One executed by the hands of the same man who had helped her lock him away.

She had not noticed that the only reason she had been able to fool the blasted FBI *special* agent was because he had been too ill to see the difference between what was real and what was not. She had not noticed that, sick as he had been, he had already seen Hannibal for what he truly was, long before she ever had. And she had not once noticed that by going along with the plans Hannibal had, she was only locking herself away.

The cliff house she was currently inhabiting in was luxuriously gorgeous in a way she had never even believed could exist before she had been invited to live within it. There was an entire wall made out of glass that showed the ocean hammering away at the cliff itself. She had her own spacious room, complete with queen-sized bed, every single gadget she asked for, and all the book she could ever want. Her food was cooked by Hannibal himself and beyond anything she had ever eaten before. There was a baby grand piano in one of the sitting rooms she was allowed to use, and a small library in one of the others. She was allowed to sit outside on the patio or to walk along the cliffs anytime he was visiting her. She had been given material so she could cook or draw or write or paint or play the piano or knit or crochet. She had everything she might ever need, except for the company of others or her freedom.

She didn't have a car and she couldn't go far as she lacked the proper outfit. The nearest neighbour was miles and miles away, too far to walk to over the uneven terrain in a day. The nearest town was even farther away. And even if she did walk that distance, she would just get herself in trouble. She was supposed to be *dead* after all.

She could not call anyone as she had not been given a phone and the house had no landline. She had no access to the internet as Hannibal made sure the house was not connected to the grid. No mail or packages were ever delivered, everything she wanted was brought to her by the psychiatrist. She also didn't have the keys to the house, and she was only ever allowed to roam freely when he was present or nearby. Oh, he had made sure there was fitness equipment for her to get some movement and to keep in shape, but there was no opportunity for fresh air as long as he was not present.

She was completely and utterly dependent on Hannibal, and there was nothing she could do about it. She was alive, but captured in a golden cage.

Graham was probably the only reason why she was still alive, and he was not even aware that she was among the living. She was so very lonely, and so very bored. She blamed him for every bit of misfortune that had befallen her, and she absolutely *loathed* both him and the fact that there was nothing she could do to change her fate.

She could blame Hannibal, but he *cared* for her and he *spoiled* her. He was all she had in this world now. He also had little to do with the death of her father as far as she was concerned, even though it was his phone call that had led to the start of the absolute hell her life had become. No, that was all on Graham and the FBI. That didn't mean that she didn't believe that he had to repent for his actions. She just didn't blame him.

Deep inside, she knew that it wasn't so easy to only blame Graham. Deep inside, she was fully aware that she only had herself to blame.

oOo

"Evening Hannibal," she greeted him while leaning against the doorpost leading into the sitting room. She had heard the sound of his wheels on the dirt as he had turned into the driveway. She had been enjoying the lovely weather outside from behind the windows looking out onto the ocean, her book and teacup where still resting on the table near the chair she had been using.

"Good evening, my dear," he greeted her in return with a soft smile playing around his mouth, as he shouldered the bag he had removed from the car. He had opened the front door first before he had even started to unload the car. He closed the car door gently and moved towards her, "I hope you have had a nice couple of days?"

She just nodded as she pushed away from the jamb and made her way towards him. She closed the door behind the doctor and followed him into the kitchen, curious about what he had brought her to eat this time. The last time he had visited, just a couple of days ago, he had brought her some kind of savoury bread filled with herbs and vegetables which had tasted really good with the homemade chorizo and liverwurst he had stored in the fridge.

"I finished Crime and Punishment," she offered him as she watched him dart around the kitchen, "it took me a while. The first 150 pages were doable, the rest not so much."
"How so?" he asked her as he turned slightly towards her.
"I couldn't really connect with the guy, nor did I like his excuse for his perceived crimes," she said with a shrug, "he murdered that pawn broker out of desperation and greed, but he felt so guilty that he just kept on moralising himself. The constant fainting was annoying as well."

Hannibal just hummed in reply as he turned back to whatever he was doing in the kitchen. He just offered her suggestions for books, and left it up to her if she wanted to discuss them or not. Sometimes she did and she would point out what she believed the character or characters had felt and why. Other times, like now, she barely managed to get through the book he had suggested or she just didn't feel like talking about it.

"You might want to give Persuasion a try after you have finished the book you are currently reading," he informed her after he had gotten whatever he needed out of the fridge, "considering the books you normally go for, you might like that one better. Would you like to sous chef?"
"No thanks," she answered as she sat down on one of the barstools. She had tried helping him cook when she had first started living with him, but she had quickly realised that she just couldn't meet his high standards and that she wasn't willing to put the needed time and effort into it, "That is one written by Austen, right? I have read Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility when I was younger. I liked the first one well enough though I believe her tendency to have all her characters go for a walk every time they needed to overthink something is somewhat strange."

She had noticed that, with time, she had started to take over some of his more formal speech patterns. She mourned the fact that she was slowly, but surely, loosing the last connections she had held to her loving parents.

“Activity is a healthy way to deal with stress,” the psychiatrist said diplomatically as he skilfully cut the vegetables and the white block of tofu he had placed in front of him. He finished the spring onion he had been working on, placed his knife down, and looked up at her, “walking, knitting, creating art, fitness. All of these act as a distraction for an overworked mind.”
“And murder?” she asked him with a slight, cheeky tilt of her lips. He just inclined his head in slight amused acknowledgement or agreement as he turned back to whatever it was he was cooking. It involve something with rice and minced meat, but that was all she knew.

“The newspaper you brought mentioned that Freddy Lounds was killed,” she said after a long minutes had gone by. He had finished cutting everything he had collected in that time period, and he had turned towards the stove. Oil was heating up in a pan, and he slowly lowered something spicy smelling into it before it was warm.

“She was,” he answered over the soft sound of something cooking. She noticed something pleased in his voice, and his eyes had crinkled slightly in satisfaction he didn’t bother to hide, “she ran afoul a particularly fiendish killer. Something she wrote must have left a bad taste behind.”
He lips had turned up slightly, and something dark lurked into his eyes as he looked up at her over the steam that had arisen from the pan, “could you set the table please? The mapu tofu is nearly done.”

oOo

Hannibal had offered to teach her how to cook multiple times, but she had never taken him on it after he had taught her some basic recipes. Her stint in sous cheffing had shown her that she lacked the needed skill and the patience to learn said skill.
While she could butcher a deer with ease, her father had always cooked her meals before he had been killed and Hannibal cooked them for her now. Why would she need to learn? *He* wanted to form a family with her, that meant that *he* could make sure she was healthy and taken care of.

“Would you care to help me create this and this meal?” he would ask her every single time he visited, but she always declined. She preferred to join him in the kitchen and just talk, or to sit in front of the large windows showing that lovely view of the ocean and day dream about whatever she wanted to do when she would finally leave the blasted cliff house, or to watch whatever series had taken her fancy that day on the large tv he had bought for her. She liked the house and the fact that he would let her do whatever she wanted within it, but she loved her freedom more.

She had tried to put some effort in the other activities he offered, however, such as reading the books he suggested or trying to learn how to sketch. She needed him, after all, and she had firmly believed that it would help manipulate him into doing what she wanted. She had liked his praise and his attention at the start. Now, it all seemed to *useless*.

Hannibal had waxed poetically about some chapel in Italy and how much he would *love* to show it to her and Graham. She had tuned him out. She had always tuned him out when he started talking about Graham. She just dreamed of her own freedom, and mentally cooked up elaborate plans how she could get away from them when they were in Europe. It was only afterwards that she started to wonder how much information and how much social cues he had given her that she had missed because she hadn't been paying him any attention. She wondered if he had *known*.

Whenever he had cooked her a meal containing seafood of any kind, she would eat everything but the fish or seafood. If she couldn't remove the fish, she wouldn't eat it. She would eat whatever meat he fed her, regardless of what *animal* it came from, but she *loathed* fish. It came from the way she associated the slimy things with Graham. She knew that he *adored* catching his own meals, but she preferred hunting over patiently waiting for her prey to come to her even though she had been her father's favourite lure. She would never be *Graham's* lure, though she begrudgingly didn't mind being Hannibal's. She had also come to dislike dogs.

She had mentioned her dislike for fish a couple of time, but he had waxed on and on about the health benefits of the creepy things. She had seen the brief flashes of irritation in his eyes, the short tightening of his mouth, or the annoyed twitch of his nose every time she had put whatever water creature he had tried to feed her aside. It had amused her at the time, the fact that she could *irritate* him on a certain level. Not enough for him to lash out, but enough to have him show his annoyance. It had made her feel young, and daring. She had wanted to be *churlish* in a way she had never wanted to be when she had lived with her parents, she had wanted to lash out at him for *forcing* her to eat something she associated with the *murderer* of her beloved father.

It was only afterwards that she had started to wonder if those small flashes of displeasure had been deliberate. Just another manner of manipulating her into doing what he wanted her to do, in this case probably making it very clear that to disdain the favourite food group of his *beloved* special agent was a bad idea. She sometimes even wondered if it was his own way of warning her against he danger she was getting herself into. She would never know.

Hannibal had also offered to teach her how to play the piano when he had realised that she had never learned. She remembered his speech of wanting her to learn how to play the harpsichord before he had cut of her ear, and she had entertained the idea to learn for a while. He had brought her easy starter books to play from, he had brought her sheet music from numbers she had mentioned she liked, he had even brought her some kind of fancy sleeves over the keys so she would always know when to press what key to play a certain number. She had tried at first. It was even enjoyable to manage to create a tune by pressing a couple of keys. It gave her something to do while left alone in her golden cage, and she really liked his proud look when she played whatever she had managed to learn that week for him.

However, she had mulishly stopped playing after she had managed to catch onto the fact that *Graham* also knew how to play the piano. She had started to doubt Hannibal's true reasons for wanting her to learn how to play. Why would she need to know how to play that *particular* instrument? Why not start her off with the harpsichord? Did he want all of them to play together, like the perfect example of a happy family? Wasn't she enough as she was?

It took her long weeks before she realised that, while he kept on asking her to assist him or while he offered to teach her things, he had become more and more disapproving of either her attitude or her as a person. She sometimes wondered if it was that, more than the fact that he was trying to get into Graham's pants, that made him visit her less and less.

oOo

"Good evening, Abigail," he greeted her politely as soon as he stepped inside the living room, "I assume you are well?"
She made a grunting noise in agreement in return but didn't move from where she had been laying lazily on her stomach on the couch. She was rewatching one of the series he had brought her when he first installed her in the cliff house on tv again, and the first season of The Following was so much more stimulating than whatever it was *he* wanted. Probably to gush about Graham or Italy again.

She hadn't been feeling too badly, but she just didn't feel up to talking. Or doing things. Or moving away from where she had been laying the entire day. She hadn't felt up to it for *days* now. Everything seemed so bothersome and useless and she was always so very listless nowadays. Her golden prison was still pretty, but the gold seemed to flake away and turn dull and grey around her.

The weather outside had come to reflect her moods. It was dreary and grey, and it rained a lot. Some days she could barely discover where the sea ended and the sky began.

"Are you feeling well?" he asked her gently, but she once again just grunted in reply, "why don't you turn off the television and walk outside for a bit while I prepare dinner? Getting some fresh air will do you good."
She didn't respond but demonstrative turned onto her side to show that she wasn't planning on moving anytime soon. It was hailing outside and the wind was fierce, and she just didn't feel like doing anything but laying there and doing nothing.

She barely paid attention to the fact that it was only after some long moments that the click of the solid heels of his shoes moved away from where he had entered the living room. She heard him place whatever he had brought in what he deemed their correct place in the kitchen, followed by him cleaning up the dirty plates and cutlery she had been too lazy to bother with. She couldn't even remember when she had last cleaned the place. It didn't really matter, he would clean it for her every time he dropped by anyway.

"Would you like to help me prepare dinner?" he asked when he re-entered the living room. It must have been near a half hour since he had arrived, and she only figured it that much time had gone by because she had barely started the episode when he had come in and it was now nearly finished.

She made a negative sound in response as she waited for the next episode to start. She didn't even bother with skipping the end credits, it would only take some moments before the next one would start and she had nothing better to do anyway. She felt quite slothful, but she would just do some jumping jacks or use the treadmill or something tomorrow. Or the day after that. Or whenever she felt like it. It wasn't like she had to, or could, show her still somewhat slender form of to someone.

She hadn't even realised that he had left the room, until he placed a plate with *something* on the salon table. She didn't look at him as she peered curiously at whatever it was he had made. It was a small plate filled with four small, round pastries. They looked like fancy cheese puffs decorated with some herb that looked like grass – dill or chives – and some fancy cream fresh. She sat up to pick one from the plate and she popped it whole in her mouth. She sputtered in outrage as her mouth was filled with the taste of fish the moment she bit into the puff.

"Profiterole filled with a rillette made from smoked trout, butter, capers and tarragon," he told her aloofly, "served with chives and whipped ricotta."

She spat it out with hacking cough and she swirled her mouth immediately with the cup of cold tea that she had forgotten to drink. Or throw out. She wasn't quite sure if it was the tea she had made that day or the day before. She glared up at him in outrage. He looked back at her, cool disapproval clear on his face.

It set the tone for the rest of the evening, until he left barely three hours after he had arrived. She had not looked at him again after that one glare she had sent him, nor had she spoken a single word. She had ignored him when he had asked her to come to the dining table when dinner was ready. She had ignored him when he had tried to start a conversation on books with her. She had ignored him when he had firmly told her that watching tv for days on end would only make her feel worse than she already did. And she had ignored his chiding when he had pointed out that she hadn't cleaned either herself or after herself and that personal hygiene was good for her own mental well-being.

She only moved away from the tv and into the kitchen after he had left. She was hungry, but she didn't bother cooking the few meals she knew how to create for herself, or reheating whatever over the top thing it was he had made. It tasted just fine, lukewarm as it still was.

oOo

He had stopped bringing up Graham or Italy or traveling whenever he visited her. He still asked her about her week, as he visited her so rarely that asking after her day was not worth the effort, but she had nothing of interest to tell him.

Over time, the conversations became less and less. While he tried to get her interested in something other than the few activities she did do, she mostly just grunted. Sometimes, she didn't even answer him when he asked her how she was or how her week had been. Some weeks, she didn't speak at all.

She had given up on trying to make him like her, or trying to manipulate him. She could no longer see the use of it, and he would free her when he firmly had Graham in his power anyway.

She didn't really do a lot. It had been months of voluntary captivity after all, and there was so little she felt like doing nowadays. Unlike those very first weeks in which she had eagerly devoured the many literary works, tried to learn how to play the piano or to knit socks, or had listened to the classical music he had brought her.

Now, she just read easy novels, or watched reruns of the few series she had, or peered at the ocean below or the ceiling above her for hours and hours on end. She barely came outside anymore, not even when he invited her to walk with him, so she couldn't tell him if she had seen whatever animal he informed her were in the area.

She had yet to pick up any type of needle to knit or crochet anything more difficult than a square. She still couldn't cook anything decent though he had left her enough easy recipes that even a child could follow safely. She hadn't touched a single sheet of music, let alone a key of the piano itself since that first month. She hadn't opened any of the literary works he had brought her to read since that day in the kitchen when he had told her to read Austen again.

She was just bored with it all.

oOo

She only realised that Hannibal hadn't visited her for at least four weeks when she ran out of food.

She had already finished all of the ready made meals he had left some time before, but she had known that he always made sure that she had some ingredients on hand in both the fridge and freezer in case she felt like cooking. Some of what had been stored in the fridge had already gone bad, and she was forced to throw it out into the bin with a wrinkled nose.

She had started on the snacks she had squirreled away first, quickly followed by the homemade bread he had sliced and frozen when she hadn't finished it when he had freshy made it. But as she had finished the frozen slices within a couple of days, she had been forced to start on the food items that couldn't be eaten as they were.

She hadn't felt like cooking still, but the last week and a half hadn't given her a lot of choice unless she had wanted to go to bed hungry. Her creations were pitiful when compared to the fancy meals she had gotten used to, but it had been edible. She hadn't bothered with the recipes, and her first couple of attempts hadn't been the best. She had even had some days that she had made too much or had been forced to throw it out as it had tasted wrong. She could deal with food that tasted *bland*, but she hadn't been able to bring herself to eat whatever she had made when it tasted *bad*. She had even forced herself to eat the *fish* he had squirreled away, though she had saved those for last.

And now she had completely run out of anything edible. The fridge and freezer were both empty. There was nothing left in the pantry, not even a lost onion or a forgotten piece of stale bread.

She searched the house a second time, somewhat desperately now, and she even dared to venture into the master bedroom. The one bedroom she had yet to go into, more out of fear than out of respect. She had skipped that room when she had went through the house the first handful of times she had made her round in search of anything to eat. She didn't feel like she had a choice now, and she was morbidly curious. It would help her forget about her hunger pangs.

It was strangely bare of any decoration or personal items and the bed was unmade. The blankets and pillows were hung out to air, and the matrass was bare of any covering. When she opened the closet, followed by the door towards the bathroom, she was surprised to see that he hadn't left any clothing or toiletries behind. For all intents and purposes, the room appeared to be as unlived in as the other guestroom was.

Her rumbling stomach reminded her that she was searching for something to eat, so she quickly searched the rest of the room. Nothing. She sagged down onto the unmade bed and leaned her head into her hands.

She sat there for long moments before she arose again. She walked resolutely out of the master bedroom and towards her own room. She put on the most sensible pair of shoes she had, a pair of sturdy sneakers, and she quickly rummaged through her laundry until she had found a sweater that was still mostly clean. The weather outside was still nice, so she just tied it around her waist.

She made her way towards the entrance hallway and grabbed her jacket from its hook. She then went into the kitchen and grabbed one of the last bottles of water she still had left out of the fridge. She folded a bag out of her jacket, just like her father had shown her how to do years and years ago, and she walked back towards the front door. She put her hand on the doorhandle and pushed it down, but no matter how hard she pushed or pulled, the door wouldn't open. It was locked.

She stared blankly at the door. She hadn't realised Hannibal had locked the door behind him when he had left her the last time he had visited. Had he done that every single time he had left? Why would he do that? Why had she never checked before? She knew that he only wanted her out and about when he was present, but to actually lock her in?

She shook her head to dispel those thoughts and resolutely she turned around to make her way into the living room. She stomped over towards the sliding door leading out onto the patio only to be stopped in her tracks as soon as she tried to open that one. Locked too. There were two ways to lock that particular door. By turning the knob around, or by placing and turning a small key in a tiny key hole hidden at the very top of the door. Hannibal had tried to explain the construction and the reason for their presence once, as these houses were normally only used during the summer period, but she had amused herself by continuously referring to those type of locks as the burglary lock.

The patio door hadn't only been locked by the knob construction. It had also been put into the burglary locks. She had never seen him unlock it, so it had not been locked before. She had been laying on the couch when he had joined her weeks ago, he had not gone near the door then. When had he-?

She turned around on her heels and went towards the nearest window. Locked. The ones in her room. Locked. The ones in the kitchen. Also locked.

She stumbled back into the living room and sank down onto the coach. She was locked in. Why was she locked in? And why had she never checked before?

She jumped up from where she had been sitting and moved towards the library room. It contained heavy book stands made out of some kind of stone. She should be able to use those to get out. With a huff she managed to lift one from it location, she ignored the books as they slowly fell over, and she waggled back into the living room. It took her longer than expected, and she was out of breath by the time she was finally there. She had become more weak than she had thought she would be. She would need to start training her muscles again, as soon as she had found something to eat.

She placed the book stand down on the salon table so she could place her hands on her knees and pant for long moments to catch her breath, before she lifted it again and held it firmly like a child would hold a bowling ball. She made her way towards the glass patio door, and swung the heavy, stone book stand against the window in a way that was not too dissimilar to how that same child would throw a bowling ball.

The heavy, stone book stand bounced back as it hit the glass and she cursed loudly as it hit her left leg right below her knee. She dropped the book stand as pain flared up. It narrowly missed her left foot as it hit the wooden flooring with a loud, crashing sound.

Her leg hurt, her lungs were protesting every movement by making her pant for breath, her muscles were screaming at her in pain, her stomach was gurgling in a clear request for food, and still the glass door and even the floor were unharmed. She cursed loudly and tears of frustration swam in her eyes.

Her second attempt did not cause any more damage to the glass than her first attempt had, nor did her third attempt do anything beyond making black spots swim into her view. The glass and wood held.

She sank down onto the floor, defeated. She was trapped.

Japan - Falling in Love

Chapter Notes

Up next week: Following Breadcrumbs.

The villa was as gorgeous and well maintained as he remembered. It was located in a small village near picturesque mountains, a smooth lake filled with icy water directly fed from the mountain glaciers, and the ancient woods nearby. The house was fully insulated and had a modern kitchen and bathroom done to his taste, but the rest of the house was still done in the olden, Japanese style of when it had been first built. The roof was done in the characteristic style, but was partially broken up halfway through to allow for a second set of windows high-up, before it continued again to create highly vaulted rooms. The sliding doors opened respectively unto the drive on one side and a neat and sober stone garden at the other side.

It was not the largest house he owned, but it was not the smallest either. It had an open floorplan with four rooms. The kitchen area opened up into the living room by way of the dining area. The dining room had tatami matts placed at a low, ancient table. The living area boasted a light wooden floor, thick pillows placed against the wall to sit on and against, a small table, and a large bookcase filled with various books and knickknacks. The smallest of the two bedrooms had been converted to the storage room years ago, and now contained various miscellaneous items such as the space heater, a closet with a variety of silken, well kept kimonos and haoris his aunt Murasaki used to wear, and multiple rare pieces of art he had yet to have shipped towards his Baltimore residence. It also contained a second bookcase filled to the brim with books written in either French or Japanese that used to belong to either his uncle Robertus, his aunt or Chiyoh. The bathroom was small but had everything needed. The master bedroom normally contained a large Japanese style futon meant for two, but he had it replaced for the time being for two singles. Th double futon was stored away in the former second bedroom.

While he would have loved to share a bed with Will he was hesitant to push the envelope too far too soon. It was not even necessarily only for the more gratifying activities a pair could enjoy between the sheets, though he would not cease his attempts to seduce him to such pleasurable acts. He longed to hold Will close, and to wake up to those gorgeous eyes hazy with sleep, the creases created by pillows marring that lovely face, and the dark, curly hair flying every which way.

But the darling was still getting used to the fact that he would devote the rest of his existence making sure he was aware just how he cherished every part of him. He would honour him in every way he could, although he would never lower himself to follow the deprived example of Hobbs and treat his dearly beloved, darling Will as if he were even remotely in the same categories as the *pigs* that ended up being elevated. Will, while he really should dress more

appropriately to show off his fit physique, was perfect just the way he was. Grumpy, dog- and nature-loving, and caring little for the social niceties as he was.

No, two separate futons in one room was the closest he was going to push him to stay to him. If that was all Will could ever give him, than it would be enough as long as he remained in his life as a permanent fixture.

oOoOo

"I hope you do not mind getting up early tomorrow morning," he said as he gazed lovingly at his dining partner, "I will not tell you where we are going but I want to take you ohanami, cherry blossom viewing, at one of the most beautiful locations I know off. I promise you, it will be well worth it."
"Cherry blossom viewing," Will repeated sceptical as he studied him like a particularly interesting insect specimen that somehow also repulsed him, "isn't that meant to be that utterly romantic activity during which a couple holds hands in the rain and kiss underneath enormous pink trees? Are there not going to be a lot of people due to the festivals?"

He laughed softly but genuinely, "you have watched too many movies. While it can be romantic, the pink blossoms actually symbolise life and death, and beauty and decay in the Japanese culture. They only flower for a short while, but they bring a sense of vibrancy after a winter period, and the fall of the blossoms remind one that life can be fleeting. There are indeed festivals that celebrate the blossoming, but the location I have in mind should not be too crowded. It is incredibly beautiful to see, and I would like to share this with you."

"I- alright," Will said, still somewhat hesitant before he added teasingly, "show me the immensely popular flowers."

oOo

"You brought me to an aquarium?" Will murmured somewhat in awe as he gazed around.
"Yes, I thought you might enjoy this," Hannibal said with soft smile as he gently rested his hand on his darling's shoulder. To call the park an aquarium was a bit of an understatement and similar to the situation with his silky chicken in a broth in that it was somewhat insulting to see it brought down to such simplicity. He had however long since learned to read how much Will appreciated the gesture and expressed it in the only way he knew. It was not a sign of him ribbing his perceived *pretentiousness*, he was honestly surprised that someone thought enough of him to bring him homemade chicken soup, or brought him to an aquatic park, "welcome to the Yokohama Sea Paradise. Come, let us look for the sea train. It will go right by the Sakura trees."

He moved his hand from his shoulder to his lower back in a languid slide before he gently nudged him towards where the arrow indicated the trains would be. Will shivered at the gentle pet but went willingly enough as he was guided by the loving touch.

It was several hours later that they finally took a moment to just sit and have a bite to eat. He had felt no need to bring food as he had checked beforehand if there was a decent eatery present at the park itself. There was. The fish they served was freshly caught that same day, and the Japanese were proud of their quality of food in all its simplicity.

He had found them the perfect spot to enjoy a meal of simmered fish with steamed rice and vegetables as a side dish. They had a gorgeous view of a lovely grass field gradually turning into a clean, sandy beach which ended at a currently nearly mirror-smooth, blue waterbody in which both the Sakura trees heavily laden with pink blossoms, the nearby castle, and the blue sky were reflected.

Will smiled at him as he caught him staring yet again. At him, and not at the divine view around them. He had little doubt that he had gained a particularly lovesick, sappy look as his eyes fell onto his companion, but he did not regret it. Will was smiling gently, with his head turned upwards to the sun to enjoy its beams. His cheeks and the bridge of his nose were faintly red due to the cold wind. His hair was a mess of curls falling angelic around his face, though partially hidden by the knitted cap he had on. His eyes had lightened from a in comparison slate grey to a fierce blue far superior than found in the most renowned sea or the most exalted tints in the sky, unhindered by his unneeded glasses. His shoulders were low and relaxed, and his entire expression and posture was *open*. Just open.

This was the most peaceful he had ever seen him, and he found that while he admired Will in any way he could *experience* him, he adored him like this.

The lack of stress caused by being away from his work, pushy agents such as the departed Jack Crawford, all expectation everyone had of him, and even the care his much beloved dogs needed made him akin to the Mars painted by Botticelli. No matter how fetching he looked while tortured by his own demons and the dark thoughts of others, he was of the firm opinion that he should always look as relaxed as he did now.

“Like what you see?” Will asked, his tone somewhere between teasingly, bashful, and flirty. The red on his cheeks had darkened becomingly, and he was playing somewhat nervously with his chopsticks.
“Very much so,” he answered earnestly, “I wish I had thought to bring my sketchbook so I could draw you, just like this. However, by lack of decent material I believe taking a photograph with my phone to be an appropriate alternative for the time being.”

And before Will could think to protest he snapped a picture of him. With his smartphone, as he had informed him he would.

The photo was decent. The lightning could have been better, as the sun was slightly above his subject which neither the camera nor the program adjusting the photo compensate for. Will’s mouth was also slightly parted as if he was about to say something, but not embarrassingly or hideously so. The picture did not do justice to the lovely blue of his gorgeous eyes, and his curls were not quite the right colour.

The photo still ended up as the background of his phone’s screen.

oOoOo

“As we are to leave back to the States in a couple of days, is there anything you would like to do or to see here in Japan?” he asked him in the last week of their all to brief holiday, “I am aware that we are too early for the Tateyama Kurobe Alpine route, so I would love to come back here next year to show you the snow corridor.”

Will looked taken aback, his lovely blue eyes wide and slightly panicked, and his voice high in disbelief, “next year? Hannibal- that’s too much. I can’t-”
Those normally sharp, and now finally relaxed, eyes had gone dark again as stress coursed through his dearest. He had pushed too hard.

“My apologies if I went too far,” he murmured softly and he leaned forwards to place a gentle hand on his upper arm. His thumb tenderly and soothingly rubbed over the unbecoming and scratchy plaid shirt and the firm muscles found underneath, “I am conscious of how hard it was for you to agree to come with me, and I am aware that you feel as if you are in my debt. You are not. At the risk of sounding manipulative, it is *I* who is in your debt. I know it is hard to believe, but I would not have come here if it was not for the fact that I wanted to show you Japan. This vi-*house* used to belong to my now deceased aunt and, as you know, my relationship with my family is not an easy one. By my own actions with regard to you I made it hard to be believed, but I want to show you where I come from. As it is not from the United States, and as it truly is no hardship for me to provide for you, it is only fair that I plan the trips, prepare the housing, and, to put it bluntly, bear the expenses.”

“I-,” was all Will managed to pronounce, and he leaned even farther forwards to gently ran his fingers through those delightfully soft curls.
“I want to show you France, and especially Paris, where I was raised by my aunt and uncle,” he continued wistfully, “I want to show you Florence, where I became a man. I want to show you the parts of Japan where my aunt took me during the holidays, the areas I have yet to show you because of the weather. I want to show you the parts of America, north and south, where I grew into who I am today. In return, I hope you can show me the places where you were raised, where you became a man, and which impacted *you*.”

He removed his hand, though mournfully, from where he had been petting Will, leaned backwards again and took both his hands in his own, “I want to be know, to be seen, by you. In return, I want to see and know you. That’s all I want for us, Will, nothing more.”

oOo

“Thank you for taking me here,” Will said on the last day of their stay in Japan. They were staying in a smaller, but no less luxurious, hotel in Tokyo as their flight back home would be an early one. They had just returned from a restaurant he had booked them a table at that provided them with both a stunning view over the city and had food that was up to his standard.

Not that he had been able to fully savour the view, or the romantic atmosphere of the restaurant. Will in a form-fitting suit was a treat, and far more enjoyable than even the greatest vision the world could provide. He had indulged in the pleasant and qualitative superb food the restaurant served, but most of his attention had been on the quiet delight Will had shown while eating or looking down on the grand metropolis spread out below them.

They had spent exploring the city, gone to Tsukiji fish market on Will’s explicit request, and had a tour through the Imperial Palace. He would have loved to go to some of the galleries Tokyo boasted, but he would save that for the next time they would visit Tokyo, and Japan. And, though he had yet to inform him, he would come back to Japan with Will next year. He was already planning their itinerary.

Will had halted him before he could enter his room, as he had booked them two separate bedrooms, and they were both still dressed in the fine suits appropriate for the restaurant.

“You are more than welcome,” he said warmly and he smiled fondly at the endearing manner in which Will was nervously twisting his hands. It was evident to him that the darling was afraid to ruin the suit, even though he would bring it to his drycleaners when they were back in the United States.

Will’s eyes were darting shyly every which way, and, before he realised what was happening, the dear had stepped forwards and pressed a hesitant and slightly shaky kiss to his cheek. It was the briefest and fleetest press of dry, chapped lips against his skin, and Will hurried away towards his own room before he had truly comprehended what was happening or before he could respond. Will’s cheeks were flaming red, and he was clearly shocked by his own boldness. He slammed his door shut with more force than needed.

He was left standing there, a hand pressed against his cheek like a teenager who had gotten their first kiss from their crush. He had truly not expected that to happen.

oOo

The flight back would have been… *awkward*, had it not been for the fact that he had gone after his no doubt embarrassed darling. Now, the flight back was spent with smiles exchanged when their eyes met – shy on Will’s side, lovingly on his – and soft touches whenever he wanted the attention of his dearest. It did not even matter that they were in business class and that the seats were separated by a thick piece of plastic, both of them were leaning as close to the other as the design allowed them.

That did not mean that it had been easy to convince Will that he need not be uncomfortable after his sign of affection. He *had* given them both some time to process the gentle kiss before he had made his way towards the other’s hotel room.

In his case, he spent that small window of time in between the kiss and Will’s flight, and the moment he knocked on Will’s door well. He took a quick shower, in which he did more than just wash himself as that look on his darling’s face had been *fetching*, and dressed himself in clothes far more informal than he would normally have chosen for himself. No, that was not quite the truth. He would have chosen the outfit anyway as he was fully aware how much Will preferred him relaxed and casual. His hair was left to dry unaided, and he let it fall wherever it wanted. There was no need to hide himself behind a mask.

He had knocked politely on the door of the room next to his, once again mournful that there was no door connecting the two rooms, and had not been surprised when it had taken longer that what one could consider necessary before the door was opened and Will’s anxious, once again slate-grey eyes appeared through the gap.

“May I come in, please?” he asked him gently. There was no need to distance himself by being polite. It would just spook the already shaken man.
Will seemed to debate with himself, but let him in. Grudgingly though it was. He immediately realised that Will had yet to change out of his suit, but that he had given into his need to fidget with the cuffs. The material had gotten wrinkled. He softly closed the door,

tenderly took a hold of his arm and guided him to sit down on his bed. He joined him immediately, but angled himself in such a way that he could see his face. His hand was kept on his arm, but he made sure not to put any pressure on his grip.

“Please do not misunderstand me, but why did you kiss me?” he asked him as soon as they were both sitting.
Will mumbled something in return, clearly mortified.
“I am sorry, you have to repeat that,” he stated kindly.

“I felt an impulse to do so,” Will stated faintly, “I am so-.”
He interrupted him, “I do not want you to be sorry. I just want to make sure that you kissed me because *you* wanted to kiss me, and not because you are of the believe that *I* wanted you to.”

That got Will’s attention and he finally met his eyes, though it was only to glare at him with blazing eyes, “that is not how my empathy works.”
“My apologies, it was not my intention to refer to your gift,” he said genuinely contrite. He truly had not considered that option, “I honestly meant the fact that we are both aware of my *affections* for you. I want you to kiss me, but only if *you want it too*. I consider us to be in a relationship, but I leave it up to you if you want to have a platonic, romantic, sexual, or friendly one. As long as we are close, and as long as I can show my care for you in whatever way you allow, I am happy. I will adhere to your limits as much as I can and as much as I am aware of them, but I do *not* want you to break your own boundaries for me either. So, why did you kiss me?”

Will’s gaze had gone down to his hands again during his speech and he had slumped forward slightly.
“I truly did want to kiss you,” he told his hands with a grimace, “I’m just… not good with romantic feelings. Or relationships. I am more used to rejection to be honest.”
“That is nonsense, and whoever told you that is, pardon my vulgarity, an utter moron,” he said flatly and he removed his hand from the younger man’s arm to gently tip up his chin until their eyes met, “your defences against the rest of the world are high and prickly, and your sense of humour might be slightly dark, but you are a caring person – one just has to look at your dogs – and you are a good friend.”

“That does not mean I am good at relationships. I don’t feel *attracted* to people unless I know them well beyond what my empathy tells me about them *and* they have given me a change,” he said bitterly in response, but his eyes did not leave his own, “and the last person I kissed, a kiss I initiated mind, told me I was too unstable for her. After she had kissed me back.”

“To be very forthright with you, Alana failed you there,” he told him softly, gently, but unfailingly honestly as he moved his hand to cradle his cheek, “you were not only incredibly sick and she should have not only noticed the fever when you kissed, but she was aware that you were under a lot of stress, the hallucination you described to her should have clued her in, and she still led you on. I was quite disappointed at her actions, and though it does not excuse mine in any way, she could and should have seen how you were suffering. Frankly speaking, I could easily understand why you did not want to continue your friendship with her after everything. But, and please pay attention because you really have to hear this, that

does not mean that you are incapable or *bad* at having a relationship. At the danger of sounding corny, you just had not met the right person."

Will laughed wetly, but his eyes had lightened back to a colour closer to blue than grey, "yes, that *is* corny."
He smiled back at him. It was just a quirk of his lips, but it was there, before he turned serious, "to come back to my main point. I cannot stress enough that I want you close and as a permanent fixture in my life, but only in anyway *you* feel comfortable with. If that means that we will remain cohabitants for the rest of our life, I will except that. If you want to kiss me, or share my bed, I will of course eagerly encourage you. But it is *your* choice."

"I would at least like to try," his darling said shyly as his eyes darted away before they met his own again with shy conviction shining through, "just, slowly. I'm no blushing virgin, but I have never had a true relationship in which someone truly *wants* me. Not really."
"Of course," he said graciously as he inclined his head, "we can go as slow or as fast as you feel comfortable with. And if you do not feel comfortable with something, we will not continue it."

"That's it?" the younger man asked him incredulous, "you would not push me?"
"I am aware that I can be incredibly *pushy*, as you called it, but I will not be forceful on this," he retorted firmly, "I can do without sexual intercourse, but I cannot do without *you*. You are *everything*."

Following breadcrumbs - Alana

Chapter Notes

I hope you guys enjoy this chapter. For everyone that celebrates it: merry Christmas!

Up next week: America part 2.

Loose files, handwritten notes and official and semi-official documents alike had been unearthed during the clean-up of Jack's office. That in and of itself was not that bizarre and most of them had been handed over to either other teams within the FBI or to the ad interim head of the Behavioural Science Unit. Jack's temporary replacement.

However, there were some scattered notes and loosely collected files of which the subject *was* strange. Contrary to what Jack had told her repeatedly, it appeared as if he had believed up until his very *death* that Hannibal was the Chesapeake Ripper after all. Or at least, that was what the collection of documents seemed to allude to.

She leafed through a hazardously piled stack of loose papers consisting of photocopies from other cases. Most of them contained handwritten notes made by at least two different individuals, though the majority of the remarks had been written by Jack himself. It was in case of five files that she recognized the slanted, spiky handwriting to be Will's. Those five cases contained detailed annotations that explained why he had singled them out, the main difference between those five individuals and the rest of the serial killer 'range' they were believed to be a part of, and the reason why he was of he firm conviction that they were actually the victim of a copycat, if not *the* Copycat. Jack's notes were sparse in comparison.

"What do you think of this, doctor Bloom?" the agent standing next to her asked her. He had introduced himself as an agent Carter, and he was part of the department that checked and even audited FBI agents. He dressed the part too. His suit was a non-descript dark blue, with a white dress-shirt and a lighter blue tie. His greying, thinning hair was neatly combed, he was clean-shaven, and his dark shoes were neatly shined. He was the type that appeared to be a normal paper-pusher. Neat, but forgettable. Someone who could disappear in a sea of equally blandly dressed individuals. She felt almost flamboyant next to him, with her burgundy dress and high heels, and she wondered not for the first time how Hannibal could delight in always standing out.

The agent was both polite and impatient as he continued, "we looked into the cases, and while we can follow the logic and agree with the fact that most of the individuals appear to be the victim of a copycat, we cannot determine why Jack was inclined to believe Hannibal Lecter to be the perp. There is nothing that points towards the doctor, not even circumstantial evidence at that, and we had assumed them to be friends."

“They were,” she murmured as she placed the file down and picked up the next. This one contained a dossier on Hannibal himself, and she felt herself look down and away as she was met with sharp, piercing eyes looking out of the picture on the first page. She felt guilty for even reading the file on his history, and she could not even bring herself to meet those lively, amber eyes in a photograph. She had no idea why Jack had carried suspicions against Hannibal, and she could not ask him now.

Will might have loudly proclaimed Hannibal to be both the Copycat and the Chesapeake Ripper when he had first been released, but he had not mentioned it to her since. Not that they had often spoken, or discussed any topics beyond her gushing about her relationship Margot, their adoration for their respective dogs, their plans for the nearing weekends, or similar light topics. They were friendly acquaintances these days, but nothing more.

The file in her hands contained quite some information on Hannibal’s past and she quickly skimmed over the two pages concerning the first decades of his life in various states in Europe until she came onto the ticker part containing his years in the United States. There were remarks in Jack’s handwriting everywhere, and he had added clips from newspapers sprinkled throughout the documents without any clear indication why they were attached to the pages. The articles were taken from newspapers both foreign and American ones, and while all of them were about various murders, she could not immediately determine why he had chosen *those* particular articles when they did not appear to have anything in common beyond the fact that people had been brutally robbed of their life.

“I cannot tell you what to do with this,” she said honestly after a long while as she stared down at a particular gruesome image from an Italian newspaper. The two people were clearly dead though she could see no visible damage to their bodies, and something within her noticed the similarities in the staging of the two victims she saw on the picture to some of the characteristics the Chesapeake Ripper showed wile staging *his* victims, “on the one hand, I have no idea why Jack was convinced Hannibal is a serial killer. I know Hannibal, have known him for *years*, and he just does not have the time or the inclinations for *murder*. On the other hand, it *is* your job to look into all this and Will, Will Graham, might have been physically ill, but I know him to abhor lies.”
“You think we should look into this,” agent Carter said, as he cocked his head slightly in consideration, “why?”

She bit her red-painted bottom lip as she considered her words carefully before she started slowly, “three reasons actually. Firstly, Jack Crawford should have never let Will into the field, but he did. Everything he has done since that very first case should be looked into. These documents, and therefore Hannibal, is part of it. Secondly, as I mentioned before, Will does not lie. He might be grumpy and antisocial and harsh, and he might have been incredibly angry with Hannibal, might have even hated him, but he is the type of person who would rather ignore whoever he is clashing with than lash out and try to destroy them. So, he might have been terribly ill and hallucinating, but he must have seen or noticed *something* that convinced him that Hannibal is capable of brutally maiming others ante-mortem. Third and lastly, it would show that Hannibal truly is innocent. It would sooth the last of the grudges people have against him within the unit.”

“Are you one of these people holding a grudge?” the agent asked her curious, his flat, grey eyes piercing as he studied her.
“I-no, I am not,” she said dignified, as she met his sharp gaze, “as I said, I have known Hannibal for *years* and we are good friends. Still are, even though we have had an affair. He does not even *fit* the profile of the Ripper.”

“Doesn’t he? We will see,” Carter almost whispered as he made a quick note on the notebook he took from his pocket, before he said louder, “I sense a ‘but’ in what you are saying.”
“But everyone is capable of murder, and Will is right most of the time,” she admitted and she felt herself blush slightly in mortification, “and no one ever asked him *why* he pointed towards Hannibal as the perpetrator of some of the most horrid murders in recent history. We just assumed that he felt betrayed and wanted revenge. I… might have changed my mind on that. I still firmly believe that Hannibal is neither the Ripper nor the Copycat and I want to see it proven once and for all, but I also want to know what Will noticed and why he was so certain.”

The agent just hummed in response before he thanked her for her time. He started leaving through some of the other files still located on Jack’s former desk, and it was clear that she was dismissed without him ever saying the words.

She placed the loose documents she held in her hands down, and murmured her own goodbye not long after, but what had been discussed stayed with her for the rest of the day.

Why *had* Will been so convinced that Hannibal was the serial killer Jack was hunting so desperately?

oOo

She did not hear from agent Carter, or anyone else within the FBI, concerning the files she had been shown, but she did hear about it from other sources.

Hannibal mentioned being questioned by the FBI about his past and his alibis for the last couple of Ripper and Copycat murders when the two of them had dinner at his place not long after. He seemed vaguely amused as he lamented the renewed attention the agents paid him, but she did read some slight irritation within him as he mentioned the fact that their repeated interruptions of his days left him with less time to lavish on his darling Will. His words, not hers.

That had also been a surprise to her, the fact that Hannibal had somehow managed to convince Will of his complete and utter devotion to him. She had been aware that Hannibal had considered him a very dear friend and that he had mourned their falling out. She had, however, not been aware of the sheer depth of emotion he had felt towards the younger male.

She had been surprised to see how *doting* Hannibal was towards the younger man, the handful of times she had seen them together since Will had been forced to live with the other psychiatrist because his own house was still in that dreadful state of disarray.

It was not that Hannibal had been a terrible partner when *they* had had their affair. He had been a great, thoughtful, and wonderful lover, both in and out of the bed, as he had brought

her homemade lunches, bought her thoughtful gifts, and always put her needs before his own while also obtaining whatever it was he needed from her.

However, seeing him with Will was like being shown the positive so she could see the negative. It was not that the older doctor had been *selfish* while he had been with her, it was that he was unbelievable *selfless* when he was with the profiler. It showed her cordiality and fondness versus besotted and enamoured, shallow attraction versus a deep-seated love, and the difference between only knowing parts of someone and ignoring those parts that did not fit with an ideal, or completely seeing them for who they were and loving them regardless of the parts that others would deem unwanted or ugly.

She even wondered sometimes, when she was feeling especially mellow during an especially grey and dreary evening, if he had not used her as a stand-in for the equally dark haired, curly headed, and blue-grey eyed, intelligent profiler. It left an especially sour taste within her mouth and she always hated herself after that thought had appeared, but she could not help but visit upon it every once in a while.

oOo

"You have been acting odd these last couple of days," she murmured softly against the naked skin of her girlfriend's shoulder one evening not too long after she had met with agent Carter in what had once been Jack's office, "is there anything I can do?"

"Not going to ask me if I am getting bored of you?" Margot asked her with some amusement, but she could hear the layers of anxiety underneath it clearly. She sat up, ignoring her own state of undress and the way Margot's eyes lingered appreciatingly on her bare breasts, to gaze down on the other woman sprawling like a lazy cat underneath the silken sheets only partially covering her.

She was aware that her brows had knitted together into a frown, "no, you would have informed me already if you were bored with me or if you wanted to break up. Please love, I know it is a hazard of being a psychiatrists that I will always unintentionally read your mood and try to fix it, but this has been going on for a while now. Please, talk to me."

Margot sat up as well, her shoulders drawn and her beautiful eyes down-turned, "I found something within my brother's vault a couple of days ago. He knew I was trying to get pregnant, even though I have the wrong proclivities for those parts, and it seems like he was making plans to have my uterus and womb removed the moment I actually *became* pregnant. Doctor Lecter was my psychiatrist, by law, and he knew of my plans. He was also Mason's psychiatrist."

"You believe Hannibal…?" she asked her aghast and she felt herself rear back as if slapped. "No," Margot said with a shake of her head and she finally looked up to peer at her sharply. She relaxed back onto the bed at the confirmation that her mentor had not actually helped hurt her beloved. She knew he was not the person to do so, he was always helpful and so very ethical when it came to doctor-patient confidentiality.

"I think he was amused by my plans to undermine Mason, and he might have some vague idea of what Mason might have wanted to do in turn, but I do not believe he would have told

Mason of my intentions. He probably would have warned me in some way if he was made aware of Mason's full plans. He warned me about the ones he actually knew, after all," her love continued, "no, doctor Lecter said some other things that are of interest. Especially now that my dear brother is dead and I am still not pregnant and do not stand to inherit even a single dime from the Verger money. He mentioned that it does not have to be *my* child that inherits everything. It could also be Mason's."

She looked up at her questioningly, "but he does not *have* any children."
"He doesn't," Margot agreed with a slight incline of her head, "but there was a piece of paper in his vault mentioning the fact that he left some of his *material* behind in a safe in Switzerland."

She licked her lips, a nervous habit her girlfriend had that she normally found endearing, and she looked away from her. While it still softened something within her, she also felt dread slowly creep upon her. Whatever was plaguing Margot, she was not going to like it.

"Doctor Lecter also mentioned something else during my sessions with him that I might have chosen to act upon," she said slowly, hesitantly, "he might also have offered a helping hand."
She sat up again and stared with wide eyes at the other woman, "what did you do?"
"Apparently, it is very easy to trigger an orgasm in a male when one applies a cattle prod directly against the prostate," Margot told her with a twist of her lips. It was in ironic amusement, she could read that much from her face, but she had yet to meet her eyes again, "doctor Lecter helped me perform it on Mason and he helped me store the *results*. It means that there is enough *material* to make sure *Mason* is going to be a daddy after all, posthumous as it is going to be."

"When did you…?" she trailed off as certain pieces of the puzzle clicked within her mind.
She felt numb as something like horror licked up her spine.
Margot eyed her in apprehension as she noticed her sudden stiffening next to her.

"You were there when he died," she whispered hoarsely, "you and Hannibal-"
She gagged suddenly as she realised what it meant and she scrambled as far away from her girlfriend as the bed and sheets allowed her to as tears filled her eyes, "you *killed* him."

"Indirectly, yes, we did," she answered her honestly and she could hear the concern for her in her voice, "I thought you knew. You were aware of my brother's behaviour towards me. You encouraged me to do something about it multiple times. This was the only thing I could think of. I've mentioned early in our relationship that I had tried to have him killed before, that was the reason why I was in therapy with doctor Lecter in the first place."

"Yes, but you-," she could not finish her sentence.
"If it helps, I was not present when Mason was actually killed," she told her calmly and she met her eyes steadily. It was clear that she did not feel guilty about her own hand in the death of a family member, no matter how disliked he had been, "I do not know if doctor Lecter killed him or if he was even present when whoever did end Mason's life acted. He made some allusions that he was aware of a serial killer who would have no difficulty in ending my *dear* brother's life when he took him away from the manor. He just promised that he would make sure he could never hurt either you or Will."

She saw the bafflement that temporarily suppressed the stark dread that had made itself at home within her otherwise frozen body and laughed without humour as she seemed to realise what had caused it, “oh yes, neither of us acted out of sheer selfishness. Mason had his *designs* on the two of you. He threatened to go after you because he was jealous of my time. Like a small child who had his toy taken away really. I couldn’t let him hurt you, but he was always so very careful to make sure he was never alone with me.”

She rolled her gorgeous eyes in disdain at the behaviour her deceased brother had shown before she continued, “however, he had apparently made some especially *crude* remarks about Will during his *therapy* with doctor Lecter. The good doctor took them as the threats they were.”

“So you *killed* him, after you *milked* him for his *sperm*?” she could not help but ask aghast. “It was him or you,” Margot told her earnestly but with a hint of steel in her voice as she slowly leaned towards her until she could touch her hands. She allowed her to hold her shaking hands loosely in her own steady ones, “and I would do anything to keep you safe. It seems doctor Lecter felt the same when it came to Will.”

oOo

Hannibal seemed to have noticed her change in behaviour, though he did not act beyond asking her if she was alright. She was more reluctant to join him and Will for dinner, and when they did meet up she was more likely to study the both of them in silence than talk.

Hannibal, as far as she noticed, acted no different than he had before she had learned what she had learned, though he doted openly on Will whenever they were in the same room. Will, patiently but grudgingly, just let it happen. She was not quite sure if they were actually romantically entangled, but they were clearly close and she had no doubt that they would get together some time in the future. Will, for all his annoyance and his wish to be left alone, seemed to have unwillingly forgiven Hannibal for whatever perceived slight both had acknowledged existed between them.

She could not help but wonder if Will *knew*. Was he aware of Hannibal’s role or hand in the death of Mason and the destruction of his house? He must know or see *something* or he would not have written the notes he had. But if he did know or suspected something, why eat the meals he was fed? Why allow the man so close to his much adored canines? Why stay at the lair of a serial killer?

Not for the first time did she wonder if his notes contained any references to the Lithuanian psychiatrist. Had Will mentioned his name, or did he just provide arguments and the markers that pointed towards the Copycat Killer, and therefore the Chesapeake Ripper, as the actual perpetrator?

She did not know what to think, but she could not help but wonder even after she had forgiven both Margot and Hannibal for their role in Mason’s death and their subsequent lie to her: why *had* Will been so convinced that Hannibal was the serial killer Jack was hunting so desperately? What had he *seen*?

Northern America

Chapter Notes

Bit early, but happy 2024!
Enjoy!

Up in the first weekend of the new year: Coming Home.

Hannibal took him to the Montana cabin as soon as both his jobs allowed for it. The weather was nice and the sun was out but barely able to warm the environment. It had noticeably gotten colder and the first red leaves had started to fall from the trees. Amazingly enough the first vestiges of winter clinging to the area made the already homily cabin even more cozy.

The fire that was needed to keep it warm, the curtains that needed to be shut early, the warm and relaxing cloths even the always elegant doctor had chosen to wear for their daily hikes, combined with the first startling browns, reds and yellows, and the last pale green shoots and flowers shyly showing their blossoms made the trip worth it.

He was smiling for days even after they had returned to the grind of their daily jobs. Not surprisingly, Hannibal slyly asked if he was ready to trade every single time he mournfully mentioned how much he missed the peacefulness and quietness of the beautiful area. Sadly, his work and the turn of the weather did not allow them to go again that year.

Strangely enough, his house was still not habitable, not even months, nearly a year even, after it had gotten damaged. At first it was because they could not get the correct material. The second time it was because the needed people were sick, or busy or otherwise occupied. Someone had even *died*, and he had quickly turned with anger in his eyes towards the Lithuanian to shout at him to stop delaying the reparations of his home. Luckily, the person on the other side of the phone had stated in time that it had been a stupid mistake on the part of the person himself as he had a boating accident while on a trip in Sweden of all places and that nothing or no one could have done anything to stop it.

But the reasons why they could not finish his home, his sanctuary in the woods away from everything and everyone, kept piling up and up. Even Hannibal got irritated after months of no good reason why they could not finish the job he was paying them for. He wanted Will to come live with him permanently, but he was a stickler to agreements and contracts and the contractor was breaking his contractual promises.

He had even gone so far as to clearly and formally demand a firm deadline, or *else*. When that deadline went by and his house was still not finished, *and* the contractor could not give them a satisfactory reason for his delay, Hannibal terminated the contract he had with the

man. He also filed a claim for a breach of contract to get the money back he had already paid and to force them to pay the fine as stated in the contract.

“I do not care for the money,” he told him after he had gotten off the phone with his lawyer, “but I am a firm believer in keeping one’s promises, or to pay the price for them.”
His eyes had flashed maliciously when he had said that, and he had *known* that he was not just talking about a monetary price. He added rather ominously, though with some levity, “and I will make sure that he will get his due.”

When inquiries were made into the business of the contractor, it was quickly found that he was not as trustworthy as his credits, and his official certificates and quality labels said he was. In fact, his malpractice with regards to his house was not the first case but it would be his last. His firm went bankrupt not long after he had been forced to pay back his monetary debts and penalties to Hannibal as the investigation showed that his company regularly hired illegal migrants, took their passports, mistreated them and did not pay them fairly for the work he forced them to do for him. As there was no true evidence of the contractor being in the known, he was the CEO after all and did not actually hire anyone directly, he got away with only a hefty fine.

The doctor was properly contrite about the entire situation, and though he did try to use it to once again convince him to live with him permanently, he also hired a new contractor to make sure his house would be finished at least sometime that year.

He was less contrite about his planned retaliation against the perceived slight. So when the doctor had run out of his own special cache of meat he had acquired from Tier and somehow procured more, he did not ask where he had acquired it. He was aware that he was acting like the three monkeys from the legends, but he guiltily figured that the former contractor had it coming.

He was not the only one to believe so and that both eased some of his guilt but made it also made it harder to maintain his own strict morality.

When two local police officers came to question them on the missing former contractor, they both made remarks concerning the disappearance that could be seen as being on the insensitive side and translated roughly to good riddance to rubbish. It was clear that they either believed him to have absconded with the last of his funds, or that someone had disappeared him as revenge for his mistreatment of either funds, people or the houses that were placed in his care. Either way, neither the police officers nor anyone they seemed to have spoken to seemed to care too much about the loss of the contractor, beyond the fact that he still owed money.

oOo

That was not the only hit against his ethical standards. He had managed to excuse the death of Randall Tier to himself at least, but the sheer callousness of everyone around him quite frankly *astounded* him.

Hannibal was not a good influence in the least, as he cared more for manners and rudeness than for murder, but he had not expected anything less from him. He was aware of what he

was and what he was capable of now, so he could arm himself against it at least slightly. But the serial mutilator was far from the only one who held that attitude, and that made it much more difficult to retain his fortitude when it came to his own set of morals and principles.

The entire society seemed to have hardened.

His own students would cheer up every single time a confirmed criminal was killed during his or her apprehension. His colleagues within the Academy sometimes jokingly grumbled, but always at least half serious, how they should bring back the death penalty. Alana, sweet and kind Alana, seemed to find the death of Margot's brother his comeuppance for what he had apparently done to his sister.

The division between what was considered good and what was considered bad seemed to shift and became based on the behaviour and actions taken by the people. While he had never seen good and evil as black and white as some might believe, he had always believed that he knew the difference quite well, and that he could recognise where the multiple shades of grey fit best.

How was he to maintain his own strict set of morals when those around him saw black as white, and evil as good? How was he to convince others that the death of a serial rapist was not something to cheer for, as he had managed to escape his long term punishment by a quick, though not necessarily peaceful or painless, death? How was that punishment for the pain and misery that person might have caused? And how did that resolve anything if the seeming perpetrator was found innocent?

The truth was, he could not and he realised more and more how callused his attitude became when he read about the death of someone. He tried so very hard to feel something, but it was no use. The entire internal deliberation and fight within himself when Tier had died continued on and on.

Hannibal did not help, as he slowly but slyly became more and more open about his extracurricular hobby and the way he chose his victims. He had noticed however that no new *meat* was introduced in the fridge or freezer beyond what the constructor had provided.

He could no longer deny that he knew exactly what the doctor was up to, and how much blood he had on his hands. It wasn't that he turned a blind eye, it was more that he didn't even have to come up with an excuse to defend his disregard and lack of care for those deaths. The people around him, even his colleagues at the FBI, did it for him.

oOo

On a more positive note, some small things changed between them after their trip to Japan. But these small changed were significant.

As Hannibal had promised, he let him decide what he did and did not feel comfortable with and how far he wanted to go. He found quickly that he *liked* the kisses Hannibal bestowed upon him. They were gentle, as if he was precious, but they could easily turn passionate. They never went beyond chaste, however, no matter how ardent the kisses were, as he did not feel ready for *more*.

He also did not find himself minding being touched, but it took some getting used to. The Lithuanian had been tactile before. A hand softly placed on his lower back to guide him somewhere, a hand on his cheek or chin to look into his eyes, a hand on his shoulder or arm to get his attention. Now, it was a wonder if he did not touch him the moment they were in the same *room*. The doctor gently touched him if he passed him, or if he handed him something. A hand would be placed around his waist of the older man was looking at something over his shoulder, or if he was right next to him for some other reason. Or even without a reason, beyond that he wanted to touch him. He never crowded him, and he always made sure that his touch was firm but not restrictive.

And if something became *too* much, or if he was not comfortable with something, Hannibal would stop, back down, and go back to what he did know he was comfortable with. He was being the perfect gentleman, and he truly did not seem to mind the glacial pace in which their relationship progressed.

oOo

His dogs had settled easily into the more enclosed environment that had become their new home, but he felt it chafe against himself the longer he was forced to stay within the city. He had always been an intensely private person and he enjoyed his space and the freedom to wander his own land immensely. Hannibal's house, no matter how spacious and no matter how distant the neighbour, was just too confined for him. The fact that Hannibal was just always there when he was in the house did not help either.

The social butterfly of a psychiatrist no longer entertained as often as he had before, and he did not go out to his musical or social affairs. He seemed to get all his needs from being with him, or from playing the records he had laying around. The few things he did need to go out for, such as his swimming and his fitness and his shopping for produce, the Lithuanian either planned for when he was at work, or he was asked to come along. The rare times that he declined to join him did not allow him enough time to recharge. The doctor was just back too quickly.

So he escaped the odd Wednesday here or a free Sunday there to his own, still ruined, house and the large plot of land that surrounded it. His dogs were glad for the freedom and the space, and he appreciated the silence and lack of the human presence, the nature in all its glory, and the fresh air. The foreigner never once intruded upon those long hours spend roaming the woods, even though it was incredibly clear that he had missed him when he was not near.

It was one such Sunday evening that some him return back to Hannibal's with cheeks and nose ruddy and abraded from the cold, his boots and the many paws covered by mud from the melting snow, and his jacket and his beanie wet with the drops dripped from the naked tree branches.

"Welcome back," Hannibal greeted him from the doorway nearest to the dogs' kennel leading into the rest of the house. He was still fully clothed in the same suit he had been wearing when he had left early in the morning so it was clear that he had yet to start cooking. He stepped aside as soon as he neared him, but he remained closer than strictly needed, "did you enjoy your walk? Your lungs are not troubling you?"

While he had easily healed from his pneumonia, they had noticed that cold weather made his lungs *ache*. Some scar tissue had been found, but they too should disappear with time.

“It was good, and I feel fine,” he murmured as he carefully stepped onto the doormat specifically placed in the entrance and started to remove his dirty boots. Hannibal immediately and eagerly supported him as he tottered on one leg, though it was not needed. He just wanted to get his hands on him, and he was not necessarily inclined to push him away, “the weather is slightly warmer than it was last week, though spring is still far removed. We probably won’t have a white Christmas this year.”

The doctor just hummed in response as he helped him out of his coat and gently fluffed his curls as static caused by his beanie made them stand up straight. He finally managed to escape the doting he was treated to, but only because Hannibal had shepherded him into one of the comfy chairs near the warm fire. He had also handed him a large mug of fresh, homemade and delightfully warm chocolate milk and had tugged a warm, ridiculously soft and probably expensive throw over his legs.

The man himself had bustled away to hang his jacket somewhere to dry. His behaviour strangely reminded him of the housewives from the series made in the sixties and seventies, which was amusing considering the fact that the man was a highly successful doctor and a prolific serial killer.

“What do you think of these woods?” the voice of said prolific mass mutilator ripped him out of his strange reverie of Hannibal rushing around in a pastel red, flowing but elegant knee-length dress while murdering a man dressed in hippy-style clothing and back to the reality in which the man dressed in dark coloured suits in bold patterns. He blinked in surprise as his now empty mug was gently extracted from his hands and the doctor’s tablet was unceremoniously handed over. He looked down at the presented images and absentmindedly started to flip through the slideshow of pictures made in late spring or early summer showing a house of a similar size as Hannibal’s stately brownstone mansion located in the middle of a forest.

He quickly skipped through the pictures of the interior of the house, which was light and airy and had more space than he would know what to do with even if it was only for a couple of days. He slowed down as he realised that the villa was not only located in the middle of the woods, which seemed to partially belong with the residence and partially fall underneath the Chesapeake & Ohio National Historical Park, but that there were multiple watering holes for fishing and that there was an orchard with fruit trees if he recognised the blooms correctly.

“It must look lovely in the fall,” he answered almost wistfully as he gazed longingly at a mirror-smooth, small lake surrounded by trees that reminded him of both his own land and the time he had spent at Hannibal’s cabin.
“It appeals to you, I take it?” the foreigner broke into his thought for the second time that day, and he shook his head sightly to get himself back to the present before he nodded distractedly, “good, I will make sure your name is also put on the deed. I purchased it this morning.”

He dropped the tablet onto is lap as he gaped up at the fondly smiling doctor.

oOo

The woman, a local officer of the law who had stopped them from entering the town hall, had been unspeakably, unashamedly, deliberately rude to them. It had not even been a homophobic remark, though that would have been bad enough as it was, as that would have at least given her the excuse of being a badly educated, narrow-minded individual who could not keep her opinion to herself. But it was very clear to him that she considered herself to be a proud Democrat, and a free-thinker. No, her remarks and her entire posture had been deliberate and pointedly focused on the both of them for some reason.

He could see Hannibal's eyes turn predatory cold with intense disdain for long seconds as he gazed down upon her, before all emotions were firmly packed away behind layers and walls and his face smoothened out into a mask that only showed confused *politeness*.

"I do not know why you feel the need to attack us in such a way, mrs…?," he started as he eyed the nametag she had proudly clipped onto her right breast. The name printed there was partially obscured by the thick, blonde locks that had fallen out of the pony tail, "but please, elaborate on why were are not allowed to enter the city hall when we have an appointment and neither of us are acting inappropriate."

She started to say something, but neither paid her any real attention. He caught some words and snatches of sentences about arrogant snobs and their expensive trinkets that would destroy the earth as they knew it, rich bastards believing they owned the servitude of others, entitled brats too lazy to handle their own agenda, and more along that line of thought. It was clear that she greatly disliked those who had money, he could sympathise, but the way she worded her grievance and the fact that she stopped them from entering a building by enforcing the limited amount of power she had while she ranted on and insulted them was out of line.

He did not care how terrible her day had been, or how horrible she felt because of something in her life, there was a line and she had crossed it.

The Lithuanian doctor was clearly sizing her up, though he made some soft sounds during the appropriate moments to do so. He, on the other hand, was studying the other man out of the corner of his own eyes. While the psychiatrist might sound and appear sincere in his polite behaviour, it was apparent to him that he was a roiling mass of all-consuming, cold *rage* on the inside. There was something malicious about the politeness he showed.

He had always known that the Chesapeake Ripper murdered his victims because of perceived slights. He had also known that Hannibal absolutely *detested* rudeness. This was the first time he saw what hatred actually looked like on him, and just how he decided upon his future victims. Because the woman had clearly found her way on *that* particular list.

He had always been surprised that he had not disliked *him*, as he knew that he was rough around the edges. He was still not quite sure why the doctor was so fond of him when he normally despised the behaviour he regularly showed off in others.

"I hear your arguments, and I would like to see your badge so I know who to contact to discuss this in the future. Thank you," Hannibal's voice cooly interrupted his meandering

thoughts as he accepted the badge and glanced briefly at it before he handed it back, “for now, however, I will have to ask you to let us through, we have an appointment and I would *abhor* being so rude as to be late. If you would excuse us?”
He grabbed his elbow, surprisingly gentle considering the murderous, sadistic intent he knew was present, and escorted him around the now gaping officer.

They quickly finished their business within the city hall, all they really needed was to add him as Hannibal’s legal and fiscal partner and to make sure they knew he shared an address with Hannibal, and it was not long before they once again had to walk past the same woman who had stopped them before.

She grumbled something after them, and the few people who heard her actually stopped to gape at her considering the words she used, but they ignored her in favour of making their way over to the car.

“You alright?” he asked the doctor as soon as they were alone in the safety of the pretentious sedan.
“I will be fine,” Hannibal answered clipped, but his eyes noticeably softened as he looked at him, “I am sorry you were exposed to such behaviour.”
He shook his head, “it was not your fault, she was clearly out of line. Does that happen often? Someone airing their grievance against those with money in such a way?”
“Not to this degree,” was the ominous response as the other man started the reverse-parked car, put it into the correct gear and started the drive towards the house they now officially shared. At least, as soon as they had visited the solicitor so his name could be added to the deed. Because Hannibal insisted upon *that*.

“I have wondered for a while, why do you accept my rudeness?” he asked after a while of silence and he turned to look at the doctor, “you so clearly hate it in others.”
“You are not rude,” Hannibal answered gently as he moved his right hand from the wheel and placed it on his left leg, close to his knee, to gently squeeze the muscles found once before he let his hand rest there. He kept his eyes on the road and easily steered them into a turn with one hand before he continued, “you are defensive, but not malicious. Your are gruff with those who are impatient with you, and brisk with everyone else as they attempt to force you in the mould they believe you should fit in, but not rude. You can be curt, but you retain your manners. It is the lack of manners and the need to be discourteous, such as our friendly officer showed, that I take against.”

They fell silent once again but Hannibal’s hand was only removed when he had to down-shift a gear. It did not take long before they were back home.

It was only once they were back inside the house and had both removed their jackets that he finally dared to ask, “what do you plan to do about it?”
“About her?” the psychiatrist asked, slightly surprised, as he turned his head towards him from where he had been hanging both their coats, “I had not-”
He interrupted himself and he fully turned towards him. His eyes were searching and there was something both hopeful and playful in his voice as he asked, “what will you *allow* me to do?”

“I- I don’t know,” he answered honestly as he let his eyes drop. He bit his lower lip between his incisors but forced himself to release it and to meet the wide, adoring amber eyes watching him greedily as he murmured haltingly, “I might not know the full extent, but I know who you are and what you are capable of. I- I don’t- I don’t *want* you to become this tame housewife version of who you are. Always obeying my every wish, always walking on egg shells. It would be dishonest of and to you. You will learn to resent me for forcing you into a role that doesn’t fit you, and it would eventually lead to the ruin of whatever relationship we have.”
“Will,” Hannibal breathed out, and he appeared both awed and utterly besotted.

“Just, be careful,” he managed to grit out as he felt himself forced to drop his eyes. He knew what he was condoning, he knew he was practically signing the woman’s death warrant by his own inaction. He rubbed his eyes tiredly and he felt his shoulders slump down. God, what had happened to his morals and his ethics?
“Don’t expect me to come with you, or partake.”

He did not look up as solid-shod heels clicked on the floor as confident steps neared him. “My darling Will,” was breathed softly before he was engulfed in strong, solid arms and he was pressed close to a muscular chest only slightly more broad than his own, “you are a marvel.”

One arm was removed away from his waist and a gentle hand cradled his left cheek as his head was forced up until his eyes met the teary, shining ones of his companion.
Hannibal must have seen something in his face, because he was being kissed passionately before he even realised it.

The lips meeting his slightly bruised ones were firm but gentle and they moved tenderly against his own. The hand holding his cheek moved up into his hair in a long caress, and it was after moments unknown that the mouth pressed against his opened enough to softly and gently suckle at the same lip he had been molesting earlier with his own teeth.

He hesitantly raised his own arms and slid them around the trim form of the other man in a loose hold. This was not the first time he kissed someone else or even Hannibal, but this was the first time he knowingly became this close to someone who went against everything he stood for *after* condemning someone who was not really criminal.

A soft noise escaped him as teeth came into play, and he felt the delighted smile as it formed on Hannibal’s lips as he heard it.

He felt a soft tongue lovingly sooth the sting in his now thoroughly abused lip before the other man withdraw entirely. Their eyes me briefly, Hannibal’s were uncharacteristically shifty and it took him embarrassing long minutes before he realised that he was feeling *shy*, and he felt his own mouth twitch into something that could be described both as a very crooked smile or as a grimace.

The doctor briefly nuzzled his nose against his own in a strangely intimately act compared to the kiss they had just shared, followed by the hand once again cradling his cheek gently sliding into his hair. Hannibal tightened his hold on his waist slightly until they were pressed

as closely together as two humans, especially when they were nearly of the same height, could be: chest to chest, and cheek to cheek.

They remained standing together in their embrace for quite some time.

Coming Home - Bedelia

Chapter Notes

This series is nearly finished. Enjoy!

Next week will be the last chapter: the epilogue.

It had been strangely calm within the Baltimore metropolitan area. The murders that were mentioned in the news were still gruesome, of course, but none had the dramatic *flair* of the man she had inklings of being the Chesapeake Ripper. There was however no article that mentioned anyone held for questioning or any arrests made with regards to the mutilations and murders committed by the Ripper, but she could not imagine the incredibly angry Will Graham not doing everything he could to have the actual perpetrator locked away after he had nearly been blamed instead.

Inquiries made into the life of Hannibal Lecter showed that he had not been recently seen at any of his normal haunts, and that he had not attended any art or music related openings, nor any philanthropical gatherings. He seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth as far as anyone knew.

She missed her house, badly. She loved the decorations and the artworks. She adored the furniture and her neat garden. And she longed for the stores that she could only find there.

In the end, the choice was an easy one. The threat to her life seemed minimal with the absence of Hannibal.

So she went home.

oOo

The soft chimes of her front door bell rang through the house and she hesitantly pushed herself up and away from her comfortable chair. She was feeling decidedly bothered by the interruption of her *meditations* assisted by her favourite blush wine, but she forced herself to make her way towards the front door anyway. However, not before she detoured passed her bag to grab her phone. No one was aware she had returned, but she could think of *one* who might have been tipped off by some means only known to himself.

She cautiously opened the front door just enough to see whoever wanted her attention, only to be greeted by an unknown woman of Asian decent. She was dressed in the uniform of a delivery service unfamiliar to her but clearly showing the meticulous quality of its promised service, and she was holding a large but absolute gorgeous flower bouquet painstakingly arranged and packed neatly to protect it.

“Doctor Bedelia du Maurier?” the lady asked her polite but harried. She had a faint accent she could not quite place, and she was calm but unsmiling.
“Yes,” she answered softly as she leaned lightly against the door jamb. She made sure that her grip on the phone was secure, but not firm enough to call the programmed number ready to be pressed.
“Please sign here,” the delivery woman stated as she stepped forwards and presented her with a familiar form used everywhere around the world. Only the logo at the top was one she was unacquainted with, but that might be because it was not a flower store she had frequented in the past or it might have appeared after she had *left* the area to secure her safety and freedom.

She signed her name with flourish and carefully accepted the bouquet as it was placed into the crook of her empty arm.
“Have a good day,” the woman greeted her as soon as she had deposited the package she was supposed to deliver and she turned around, made her way towards her vehicle and drove off. She was left behind standing in the doorway, phone in one hand and flowers in the other.

oOo

Closer inspection of the bouquet after it was placed in a large vase with water showed that it was clearly chosen with her taste in mind.
Even the card that accompanied it was clearly meant to appeal to her, though the message was short.

To doctor Bedelia du Maurier,
Welcome home.
Doctor Hannibal Lecter.

It was innocent enough. Both the message and the card. The flowers, and especially their implication, were not and she gazed at them from the same distance one would study a particularly venomous snake from.

To the untrained and unknown eye, the bouquet was created to match a certain theme. All flowers were white and all flowers were on the *expensive* side. At the first glance, it was clear that they were meant to convey a sense of elegance, of purity, of *care* even. That was, until one paid closer attention to the kind of flowers and knew the sender.

Perfect white roses, slightly imperfect Queen Anne’s lace, white gladioli, and the large heads of lilies and amaryllis open enough to show that they too would turn out to be white dominated the gorgeous arrangement and were neatly supported by more muted but fresh green and red leaves. And all of it formed in such a way to form a *spray.*

She looked a while longer at the bouquet before she finally gave in and started to search for the actual meaning of the flowers. It was very Victorian and she had considered herself too modern to have ever learned the language of flowers, but the sender would know. Hannibal had always preferred his little intrinsic, *charming*, old-world oddities after all.

Of all the different meaning they might have, humility and innocence, sanctuary, purity, rejuvenation of the soul, tied together with renewal and symbolic *change* matched best with what she knew of him and the message he might try to send her. The Queen Anne’s lace were

clearly damaged on purpose, so her sanctuary was imperfect. The shape of the spray made it appear as a funerary arrangement.

She did not know if she should read the bouquet as a threat to her very existence, or as a olive branch.

She drowned the rest of the wine from her glass in a single swig. This was not how she had hoped her return home would start.

oOo

Driving by *his* place on a day that she knew for sure he had patients on, just out of curiosity of course and not out of any banal need to feel *safe*, left her feeling more unmoored than she had expected she could ever feel.

His driveway had contained two cars where it should have held none. One immaculately clean, austere, black Bentley Flying Spur and one well maintained but older model, light blue, equally spotless Volvo. She did not quite know what make and model it exactly was, but she did not have to guess to determine its owner. There was one person she knew of that might drive a car like that and be *tolerated* by Hannibal as to drop by on his apparent day off.

Surprisingly, she noticed just that the house was strangely *bare* before she was forced to continue to drive. Her white Audi was both noticeable and well-known by at least one resident of the neighbourhood.

oOo

Her house was once again in the same sober and precise shape as before she had *left*. All dust cloths covering the furniture had been removed, everything had been cleaned until it was immaculate or it shone, and she was ready to show herself once more to the outside world if needed.

Not that she had anyone to show herself *to*. She had already been a recluse long before she had felt the need to leave, with Hannibal being the only individual she saw regularly. Her *experience* with her patient had left her shaken and forced her not only into early retirement, but also caused untold damage to her psyche she had never bothered to heal. There was no psychiatrist in the world she trusted enough to help her, not even herself and especially not the one who had been there to help her make it *all go away*.

Why would she, when interesting people easily fell into the pattern of mailing or calling her instead of stopping by? When all direct interaction she needed was provided by Hannibal Lecter? When, if needed, she could easily leave the safety of her house to visit, say, someone in prison to confirm what she had always expected?

No, she would never regret those handful of years in which she had turned herself into a recluse who rarely went out but still managed to publish enough articles and books to remain relevant in her chosen field. Except for one detail. Her life as a recluse had left her open to the felt threat she was currently facing.

A threat she had no doubt would visit her sometime soon.

oOo

Hours filled with a tense and nervous excitement turned into days. And days turned into weeks, but her expected visitor never appeared. A quick check, online and via phone, verified that Hannibal still had his practice within Baltimore though he had cut down on his hours, and that his residence was still irregularly used for his famous, or infamous, dinner parties.

After weeks had gone by in which she was left alone, she felt safe enough to venture outside of the secure shell that had become her life. She went into the luxury stores she knew *he* also frequented, but she never ran into him while she was there, nor did it cause him to come and visit her at home.

She became bolder and bolder, until she finally decided to go to the place she had missed most. A small art gallery specialised in modern art which had a new exhibition she was *salivating* to visit. She was not normally one for art, but she *adored* that place. Most of the art she had in her home came from artists that had their works hung in that gallery.

She made sure to visit on an afternoon of a regular working day, some time after the official opening of the exhibition had taken place. If Hannibal were to visit the gallery for that particular exhibition, it would have been during the opening night. She would know, he had been the one to introduce her to this particular gallery, and she had joined him more than once during the entire circus of to see and be seen of an opening night.

She was greeted amicably enough when she entered the building, but no recognition was visible on the face of the artist greeting her. She had been gone for too long to be counted as a regular.

The first half an hour quickly went by as the made her way slowly through the tiny hall holding containing the artwork included in the exhibition. The next hour was slightly more slow to pass by, but still enjoyable as she toured the rest of the gallery. It was the last ten minutes that were agonising.

Her curiosity and the enjoyment she had felt at the lovely weather, the fact that she was out and about at her favourite place, and the delightful art had led her to enter a part of the gallery she normally skipped: the hall containing impressionistic paintings of landscapes. She had never been one for the works depicting nature, but she was in too good a mood and not ready to leave yet. So she went into the hall.

The first couple of paintings took her complete attention as, surprisingly, the style of painting reminded her strongly of Waterhouse. They were pretty enough, and she admired them for their subjects and the stories they were used to tell. It was this lack of attention that brought her into the predicament she found herself in. She was not the only one in the small hall.

It was the familiar voice that captured her attention, and forcible *dragged* her out of her good mood and made her mourn both the emptiness of the gallery as a whole she had appreciated so much and the time of day she had chosen to visit it.

“What about this painting makes you appreciate it so?” the dulcet tones of her current most unwelcome person sounded from her right, and she whipped her head quickly enough towards the owner of the voice that something in her neck popped. Unsurprisingly, but very much unwanted, she recognised Hannibal Lecter standing intimately close to another, less familiar but still identifiable, man.

“You mean, except for the obvious presence of a large mass of water dominating the picture?” Will Graham drawled amused. She realised how close the two were standing together. The right side of Hannibal’s chest was pressed firmly against the left side of Graham’s back, or Graham was leaning comfortably against Hannibal. The blue-grey of his checkered shirt combined comically with the austere cut of the foreign doctor’s oxblood coloured three-piece suit.
“Except for that, yes,” Hannibal responded equally amused, and she was shocked to hear how *genuine* he was. He was honestly, truly amused.
“I know it is no Raft of the Medusa, but I like the peacefulness of this painting,” the slightly younger man sounded wistful, “the calm, open sea, the tiny ships in the back and the larger one at the front, the small stroke of land at the front, the style of painting. It is *serene*.”

He looked good. The last time she had seen the FBI agent – former agent? - he had been sick and locked away. He had been pale and angry and hurt. He had been emaciated, lonely with no outlet for his aggression. He seemed much better now. While his choice of clothing was not what she would describe as fashionable, he appeared healthy and happy. His dark curls were glossy, he seemed well fed but in good shape, he looked comfortable while resting against someone who had not only hurt him but who he had accused of being a serial mutilator and killer, and his slate-blue eyes were sharp.

And looking directly at her. She sucked in a sharp breath as amber coloured eyes too were turned towards her. Both men turned bodily her way. It was only Hannibal however that made his way over towards her, but not after he had gently pressed a large hand against the lower back of Graham.

“Bedelia,” Hannibal sounded delighted to see her, but she could easily see in his very posture and she could easily hear in his tone how he put on the person suit so familiar to her, “how pleasant to run into you here. How have you been? You look surprisingly pale for someone who has stayed in the sunlit south.”
“Doctor Lecter,” she greeted back steadily, but she could feel her muscles tense as anxiety made its way through her body. She could feel the sharp gaze of the special agent following her every move and noting her every tone of voice, but she did not dare remove her eyes from the larger predator, “I found the weather did not quite agree with my complexion.”
“Yes, I can imagine why,” he smiled down at her, before he turned back to his companion and reached towards him. Graham easily stepped forwards and gently touched the back of his hand with the fingers of his right before he stood shoulder-to-shoulder in front of her, “I believe you have yet to meet Will Graham?”

“We have met before,” the agent said with something which might be a smile, but might also be a grimace. His dislike for social contact as described to her by Hannibal seemed real. His dislike for eye contact less so, as his gaze unshielded by the so lamented but currently absent

glasses bored into her own eyes, “she came to show her support during my stay at the tender mercies of Chilton. I believe this was just before she left Baltimore.”

Hannibal’s eyes gained something dark and fierce at his words, and she felt a shiver pass over her back. Did the agent know what he had just caused?

She was about to say something to defend herself, forced into a corner as she felt, but soft voices coming closer cut through the tension she had felt mounting.

“Ah, that would be the artist who painted the seascape you were admiring, my darling Will,” Hannibal said, once again back to his normal geniality,” it was lovely to see you again Bedelia, I hope you have a nice day.”

She muttered her own goodbyes, far more impolite than might have been safe and she used to opening created by the artist to scurry away in a manner that she was normally too proud for.

oOo

“Good evening, dear Bedelia,” the so dreaded voice came from the armchair currently shaded by the lack of lamplight.
“Hannibal,” she managed to answer shakily as she turned on the lights. Her unwanted and uninvited guest seemed fully relaxed as he lounged back in her favourite chair. He was once again dressed in another of his mutedly flamboyant three-piece suits and his eyes were bright.

“I was wondering if I might see you tonight,” he said ponderously as if his very presence did not cause her fear. His dark eyes studied her with the same dark amusement that was so familiar to her, “I was half convinced that you had fled the state again.”
“You knew where I went the last time I left Baltimore,” she said with as much dignity as she could as she made her way over towards the small cabinet containing her wine. She heard the rustling of clothing from behind her, but she did not turn around.

“I was so free as to prepare a glass for you,” his voice came from directly behind her and a glass filled with a pink wine appeared in the left corner of her eyes.
“Thank you,” she murmured politely as she turned towards him and accepted the glass.
“You are very welcome,” he answered with a smile that did not meet his eyes and he went back to the chair he had been occupying. She let herself sink with less indignity than she would normally into the chair opposite of his, her wineglass held firmly into her hands. He took his glass from the side table where he had placed it, took a measured sip and put the glass back down. His left leg was lazily crossed over his right, and his hands were neatly placed in his lap.

“Why are you here?” she asked him after she had taken a fortifying *gulp* of her own wine.
“You are a wonderful woman,” he started ponderously and apropos of nothing, although his sharp dark eyes never left hers, “smart, beautiful, elegant, and successful in your chosen field. You observe, but you do not participate. Even your move back here was calculated. You believed Will to have succeeded when you saw nothing in the news.”

She took another mouthful of wine, her hands shaking.
“You are convinced you observed something about me, or my person suit, that placed you in

danger, but could give you the upper hand as long as someone else manages to get the better of me. You have no evidence, just an incomplete assumption," he continues, "on the other hand, we both know that I have all the evidence needed to have you convicted for a wrongful death. It will not be easy, and you might cause damage to my reputation, but in the end you will suffer the defeat."

He leaned forward and the small but insincere smile that had not left the corners of his mouth fell away and turned his visage grim and *dark*. Otherworldly, even, in its intensity and the threat implied in his eyes, "I would not have cared before. I can easily start my life elsewhere with little difficulty. Italy is beautiful this time of year, and Florence is always worth the visit. However, I stand something to lose now, and I would *abhor* causing any damage to *Will's* reputation, now that it has finally been restored."

She felt black spots start to appear in front of her eyes and she looked accusingly at the wine held in shaking hands.
"Oh, do not worry. I did not drug your wine," he said sardonically as his nostrils flared and he leaned back, "that, my dear Bedelia, is the feeling of *fear*. We both know that I could completely destroy you, but not without hurting my darling. So we have reached in impasse."

"What do you plan to do with me?" she managed to bring out slowly.
"You have been awfully rude," he said softly but darkly as he rose from his chair, "making inquiries into my doings, driving past my house in Baltimore, scurrying back here only after you believed yourself *safe*, being a general nuisance to the life I have built with Will."

He stalked forward until he could lean over and gently stated, "what is to be done about that?"

Epilogue - Europe

Chapter Notes

> A year after I started writing this series, it is finally done. I hope you enjoy the epilogue, and feel free to let me know what you think of the story/series!

He looked languidly around himself as he gently but firmly pushed his hat onto his head to keep it in place. The wind was warm and dry, but surprisingly strong. The weather was nice and sunny, and the sky had a blueness that was very typical for the region.
"Enjoying the view?" a voice asked softly from behind him before another person stepped indecently close to rest himself next to him against the balustrade.

He turned slightly and smiled at his companion. He eyed the other's bare forearms and strong physique dressed in well-fitting off-white linen to offset his complexion appreciatingly for a moment before he looked up. His smile grew wider at the adoring eyes that met his as sunglasses were gently removed and carelessly but artfully placed within greying, dark blonde, wind-tousled hair.
"I am, yes," he said lazily as he gave the other another once-over, before he turned back to the view he had been captivated by.

The Piazzale Michelangelo had been some way of the centre of the city of Florence, but was incredibly busy. Busloads of tourists from different parts of the world were dropped off to make photos of the panorama of the city itself before they would take the long walk into the city proper itself.

Hannibal had been busy doing *something* and he had made the long trip up on his own. He had no doubt that he would read about whatever the doctor had done tomorrow in the local newspapers anyway, if he was not told about it sometime during their night together.

He felt more than saw his companion join him as he too leaned more heavily against the balustrade to admire the view instead of him. Or more specifically, his behind.
"This is were I became a man," Hannibal said wistfully after a while, "between the legendary artworks, the grandiose buildings, the delightful food, and the infamous history of the area."
"To which you added?" he asked playfully as he glanced at him from the corner of his eyes, "don't think I didn't recognise *someone's* hand in a certain *monster's* murders."

"Of course," Hannibal said with a soft but smug smile as he turned towards him, "one should always try to leave a legacy behind."
"Pretentious," he sing-songed.
"Realistic," the doctor corrected him fondly as he gently put his right arm along his back in a half-hug.

“Sure, you keep telling yourself that,” he teased but he let himself be pulled in closely and pressed a gentle kiss against the corner of his mouth, “we both know you are as showy and arrogant as a peacock.”

Hannibal just hummed in response as he kissed him chastely on the lips, preferring to let his actions speak for him.

oOo

It had taken him years since he had been released from his unfounded incarceration and his subsequent wish to be left alone by all those who had put him there, but he was finally happy with himself, and his lot in life. And he had finally fully forgiven the Lithuanian psychiatrist. He trusted him enough to bind himself to him for life, and to at least somewhat accept his *strange* extracurricular hobbies as long as he promised to be careful.

He no longer felt the need to ask where the meat came from, or what exactly he put in his mouth. The rare times he did, Hannibal was fully honest. He never tried to feed him the *other* white meat, unless he himself specifically asked him if he could try something from the other man’s plate.

Things had changed between them, in a positive way, and they had learned to compromise. He had finally learned to live with his own brand of darkness, and Hannibal had willingly ceased his random slaying of those individuals whose only crime was their lack of manners.

That did not mean that the doctor had stopped killing at all. It just meant that he had slowed down significantly. He seemed to prefer his company more than he felt the need to cull the metaphorical herd. The rare couple of times the Lithuanian psychiatrist *did* feel the need for violence, he would by his own choice either try to get rid of it by spending long hours doing some kind of sport, or even more rarely he would come to him with leashed, murderous intent in his darkened eyes. It was in those latter cases that one or multiple individuals tended to disappear. Sometimes they reappeared, transformed into the familiar *art* as only the Chesapeake Ripper could create. Sometimes they did not.

With his help, he easily got his hands on those whose crimes were enough to see them condemned to the negative side of society. The part in which their disappearance or death would be lamented only with a ‘wish it would have been sooner’ or a ‘he or she deserved it’. Even the local police or the FBI rarely looked into the case long enough to really form a threat to their safety and happiness.

That was not to say that *all* of those individuals were criminals. Far from it even. But their actions were far enough against the norms of society that people would not miss them. Or not miss them for long, at least.

The only criteria Hannibal really had was that they were healthy, useful for his artwork if he was so inclined, and they could be served for whatever fancy dishes he had in mind to serve to his adoring fans. Because of course he would feel the need to show of his culinary skills to a larger public not long after, and he had never promised to not *feed them* the taboo cuts of meat. Murder, providing others with a show, and his own amusement seemed to comingle in his mind.

He loved him and his weird hobbies, though he made sure to skip out on the socialising. And not once, in all those years, did he join him on his hunts.

oOo

Europe was something, alright. He could feel that the cities had a history that dated back to times unimaginable, and though they were of a similar size to most of the cities he was used to, they felt heavier and more chaotic. The cities in America had been planned, the ones in Europe had grown.

London, Edinburgh, Paris, Rome, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, *Florence*, all of them felt *old*. Even the many damages caused by both world wars, renovations, and attempts at modernisation could not distract from the sheer age of the cities.

Hannibal had stories and little anecdotes for all of them.

He lectured him enthusiastically on the history of the city du jour, including all the dark tales and legends that were known, before he told him of his *own* history with wherever they were at that moment. And, of course, his own addition to the significant tales of horror, darkness, depravation, and death most of these ancient cities had seen and survived.

It was clear to him, however, that both Paris and Florence held a special place in his heart, and they spent more them in either of them than in all other cities combined. Though some things had changed with time, Hannibal still knew most alleys, nooks and crannies by the back of his hand. He eagerly showed him around the city and the local gallerias, took him to eat in those spots only locals normally came and to the opera houses, and showed him those spots of nature that would appeal to *him*.

They never went to Lithuania, and he did not ask to see where his lover and husband had been born and where he had been forced to unwillingly and unknowingly cannibalise his beloved sister. He wanted to know him, but he was not willing to hurt him more than necessary. Hannibal would have taken him, had he asked, but it would pain him more than it would satisfy his own curiosity.

After all those years together, he no longer cared to wound him *that* deeply. Sometimes, it was better to let the ghosts sleep.

oOo

Alana visited them the day after they had returned from their trip to Europe, their dogs in tow as she had taken care of them. Her two sons came along. The youngest one was held in a sling neatly tied against her chest, firmly asleep and uncaring for the noise, the elder of the two held on her arm.

“How was your honeymoon?” she asked playfully as soon as the dogs had been released from the van, had greeted their humans enthusiastically and with furiously wagging tales, and had chosen to remark their territory, “did you actually *see* anything, or was the ceiling of the hotel room *that* interesting?”
Neither man was prudish enough to blush at her insinuation.

“He actually has flats in Paris and Florence,” he stated in clear amusement, “and those ceilings *were* quite interesting, painted with artwork as they were. But no, I was shown quite a bit of Europe.”
“Appartements,” Hannibal corrected him with a fond smile, “and *we* own those *flats*. We are married in full community of property, after all.”

He waved him away with a playful but no doubt loving grin of his own. It was a point of playful contention between them. He cared little for the wealth Hannibal held and was more than happy with his stream, his dogs, his old Volvo, and his tweed, jeans and flannel. Hannibal on the other hand wanted to spoil him rotten, and would see him bedecked in the richest clothes regardless if he went out to work or to fish in his stream.

They had found a way to make it work, among others in which his clothes slowly disappeared if they were old and holey and better quality of the same would reappear next to some pretentious suits, and they were happy together.

“A little bird told me that you have resigned from the FBI Academy?” Alana asked after they had gone inside, had all – even the two boys – been plied with warm tea and something sweet to nibble on, and made all the necessary small-talk needed.
“Yes, I was *asked* to become the head for the entomology research department elsewhere,” he answered contently, proud of his own achievement, “I agreed.”
“I am happy for you,” his former colleague told him earnestly.

They had never repaired whatever it was they had been before his incarceration, but they were friendly. However, her relationship with *Hannibal* had significantly changed. They had come to believe that she *suspected* something, but had either no evidence or choose to make herself blind. They were sure that Margot *knew*, but she had her own reasons to keep her silence, and she did not seem to care whatsoever.

oOo

“I bought us a house in Tuscany,” Hannibal softly said into his shoulder, one evening not long after they had gotten back from their honeymoon and he had agreed to the position at the University of Pisa, “there are no true forests nearby, but I made sure to keep your preferences in mind.”
“As I knew you would,” he told him lovingly as he turned to face him, gently dislodging his hold on his waist, “and we will always have the cabin in Montana, if needed.”

The choice to move to Italy had not been lightly made. He had actively responded to a vacancy at the Universities of Pisa and Florence both as they had entomology departments. Hannibal in turn had decided to see if he could get a position at a museum or gallery somewhere. To his surprise, his monograph and his recent work had been well-known enough that they were willing to make *him* the head of the department and leave whoever would have gotten that promotion with the job he had *actually* applied to.

The FBI, even without any true evidence and without Jack at the helm, had never quite lost their suspicion. Both of them were scrutinised beyond what was decent. He would have some agent or another drop by just to *check in* within his Academy office more often than any other

teacher, and Hannibal would have an agent come and check his alibi every single time a new suspected Chesapeake Ripper kill, a true one or not, dropped.

It was time for them to move on and to start anew somewhere else, just the two of them and their dogs. Let them believe whatever it was they wanted, they had no evidence. They just wanted to be left alone and live their life in peace.

Until death did them part.

End Notes

I got some questions in the other parts of these series, so here are some answers already:
- I went with slate grey eyes instead of blue for Will for a reason. You will have to read part 3 (this story) to know why ;)
- Yes, Abigail will appear in this story

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